

**МАКСИМ  
ГОРЬКИЙ**

THROUGH  
RUSSIA

Максим Горький  
**Through Russia**

«Public Domain»

**Горький М.**

Through Russia / М. Горький — «Public Domain»,

## Содержание

THE BIRTH OF A MAN	5
THE ICEBREAKER	13
GUBIN	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	42

# Maksim Gorky

## Through Russia

### THE BIRTH OF A MAN

The year was the year '92 – the year of leanness – the scene a spot between Sukhum and Otchenchiri, on the river Kodor, a spot so near to the sea that amid the joyous babble of a sparkling rivulet the ocean's deep-voiced thunder was plainly distinguishable.

Also, the season being autumn, leaves of wild laurel were glistening and gyrating on the white foam of the Kodor like a quantity of mercurial salmon fry. And as I sat on some rocks overlooking the river there occurred to me the thought that, as likely as not, the cause of the gulls' and cormorants' fretful cries where the surf lay moaning behind a belt of trees to the right was that, like myself, they kept mistaking the leaves for fish, and as often finding themselves disappointed.

Over my head hung chestnut trees decked with gold; at my feet lay a mass of chestnut leaves which resembled the amputated palms of human hands; on the opposite bank, where there waved, tanglewise, the stripped branches of a hornbeam, an orange-tinted woodpecker was darting to and fro, as though caught in the mesh of foliage, and, in company with a troupe of nimble titmice and blue tree-creepers (visitors from the far-distant North), tapping the bark of the stem with a black beak, and hunting for insects.

To the left, the tops of the mountains hung fringed with dense, fleecy clouds of the kind which presages rain; and these clouds were sending their shadows gliding over slopes green and overgrown with boxwood and that peculiar species of hollow beech-stump which once came near to effecting the downfall of Pompey's host, through depriving his iron-built legions of the use of their legs as they revelled in the intoxicating sweetness of the "mead" or honey which wild bees make from the blossoms of the laurel and the azalea, and travellers still gather from those hollow stems to knead into lavashi or thin cakes of millet flour.

On the present occasion I too (after suffering sundry stings from infuriated bees) was thus engaged as I sat on the rocks beneath the chestnuts. Dipping morsels of bread into a potful of honey, I was munching them for breakfast, and enjoying, at the same time, the indolent beams of the moribund autumn sun.

In the fall of the year the Caucasus resembles a gorgeous cathedral built by great craftsmen (always great craftsmen are great sinners) to conceal their past from the prying eyes of conscience. Which cathedral is a sort of intangible edifice of gold and turquoise and emerald, and has thrown over its hills rare carpets silk-embroidered by Turcoman weavers of Shemi and Samarkand, and contains, heaped everywhere, plunder brought from all the quarters of the world for the delectation of the sun. Yes, it is as though men sought to say to the Sun God: "All things here are thine. They have been brought hither for thee by thy people."

Yes, mentally I see long-bearded, grey-headed supermen, beings possessed of the rounded eyes of happy children, descending from the hills, and decking the earth, and sowing it with sheerly kaleidoscopic treasures, and coating the tops of the mountains with massive layers of silver, and the lower edges with a living web of trees. Yes, I see those beings decorating and fashioning the scene until, thanks to their labours, this gracious morsel of the earth has become fair beyond all conception.

And what a privilege it is to be human! How much that is wonderful leaps to the eye-how the presence of beauty causes the heart to throb with a voluptuous rapture that is almost pain!

And though there are occasions when life seems hard, and the breast feels filled with fiery rancour, and melancholy dries and renders athirst the heart's blood, this is not a mood sent us in

perpetuity. For at times even the sun may feel sad as he contemplates men, and sees that, despite all that he has done for them, they have done so little in return...

No, it is not that good folk are lacking. It is that they need to be rounded off – better still, to be made anew.

Suddenly there came into view over the bushes to my left a file of dark heads, while through the surging of the waves and the babble of the stream I caught the sound of human voices, a sound emanating from a party of "famine people" or folk who were journeying from Sukhum to Otchenchiri to obtain work on a local road then in process of construction.

The owners of the voices I knew to be immigrants from the province of Orlov. I knew them to be so for the reason that I myself had lately been working in company with the male members of the party, and had taken leave of them only yesterday in order that I might set out earlier than they, and, after walking through the night, greet the sun when he should arise above the sea.

The members of the party comprised four men and a woman – the latter a young female with high cheek-bones, a figure swollen with manifest pregnancy, and a pair of greyish-blue eyes that had fixed in them a stare of apprehension. At the present moment her head and yellow scarf were just showing over the tops of the bushes; and while I noted that now it was swaying from side to side like a sunflower shaken by the wind, I recalled the fact that she was a woman whose husband had been carried off at Sukhum by a surfeit of fruit – this fact being known to me through the circumstance that in the workmen's barraque where we had shared quarters these folk had observed the good old Russian custom of confiding to a stranger the whole of their troubles, and had done so in tones of such amplitude and penetration that the querulous words must have been audible for five versts around.

And as I had talked to these forlorn people, these human beings who lay crushed beneath the misfortune which had uprooted them from their barren and exhausted lands, and blown them, like autumn leaves, towards the Caucasus where nature's luxuriant, but unfamiliar, aspect had blinded and bewildered them, and with its onerous conditions of labour quenched their last spark of courage; as I had talked to these poor people I had seen them glancing about with dull, troubled, despondent eyes, and heard them say to one another softly, and with pitiful smiles:

"What a country!"

"Aye, – that it is! – a country to make one sweat!"

"As hard as a stone it is!"

"Aye, an evil country!"

After which they had gone on to speak of their native haunts, where every handful of soil had represented to them the dust of their ancestors, and every grain of that soil had been watered with the sweat of their brows, and become charged with dear and intimate recollections.

Previously there had joined the party a woman who, tall and straight, had had breasts as flat as a board, and jawbones like the jawbones of a horse, and a glance in her dull, sidelong black eyes like a gleaming, smouldering fire.

And every evening this woman had been wont to step outside the barraque with the woman in the yellow scarf and to seat herself on a rubbish heap, and, resting her cheeks on the palms of her hands, and inclining her head sideways, to sing in a high and shrewish voice:

Behind the graveyard wall,  
Where fair green bushes stand.  
I'll spread me on the sand  
A shroud as white as snow.  
And not long will it be  
Before my heart's adored,  
My master and my lord,  
Shall answer my curtesy low.

Usually her companion, the woman in the yellow scarf, had, with head bent forward and eyes fixed upon her stomach, remained silent; but on rare, unexpected occasions she had, in the hoarse, sluggish voice of a peasant, sung a song with the sobbing refrain:

Ah, my beloved, sweetheart of mine,  
Never again will these eyes seek thine!

Nor amid the stifling blackness of the southern night had these voices ever failed to bring back to my memory the snowy wastes of the North, and the icy, wailing storm-wind, and the distant howling of unseen wolves.

In time, the squint-eyed woman had been taken ill of a fever, and removed to the town in a tilted ambulance; and as she had lain quivering and moaning on the stretcher she had seemed still to be singing her little ditty about the graveyard and the sand.

The head with the yellow scarf rose, dipped, and disappeared.

After I had finished my breakfast I thatched the honey-pot with some leaves, fastened down the lid, and indolently resumed my way in the wake of the party, my blackthorn staff tiptapping against the hard tread of the track as I proceeded.

The track loomed – a grey, narrow strip – before me, while on my right the restless, dark blue sea had the air of being ceaselessly planed by thousands of invisible carpenters; so regularly did the stress of a wind as moist and sweet and warm as the breath of a healthy woman cause ever-rustling curls of foam to drift towards the beach. Also, careening on to its port quarter under a full set of bellying sails, a Turkish felucca was gliding towards Sukhum; and, as it held on its course, it put me in mind of a certain pompous engineer of the town who had been wont to inflate his fat cheeks and say: "Be quiet, you, or I will have you locked up!" This man had, for some reason or another, an extraordinary weakness for causing arrests to be made; and, exceedingly do I rejoice to think that by now the worms of the graveyard must have consumed him down to the very marrow of his bones. Would that certain other acquaintances of mine were similarly receiving beneficent attention!

Walking proved an easy enough task, for I seemed to be borne on air, while a chorus of pleasant thoughts, of many-coloured recollections, kept singing gently in my breast – a chorus resembling, indeed, the white-maned billows in the regularity with which now it rose, and now it fell, to reveal in, as it were, soft, peaceful depths the bright, supple hopes of youth, like so many silver fish cradled in the bosom of the ocean.

Suddenly, as it trended seawards, the road executed a half-turn, and skirted a strip of the sandy margin to which the waves kept rolling in such haste. And in that spot even the bushes seemed to have a mind to look the waves in the eyes – so strenuously did they lean across the riband-like path, and nod in the direction of the blue, watery waste, while from the hills a wind was blowing that presaged rain.

But hark! From some point among the bushes a low moan arose – the sound which never fails to thrill the soul and move it to responsive quivers!

Thrusting aside the foliage, I beheld before me the woman in the yellow scarf. Seated with her back resting against the stem of a hazel-bush, she had her head sunken deeply between her shoulders, her mouth hideously agape, her eyes staring vaguely before her, her hands pressed to her swollen stomach, her breath issuing with unnatural vehemence, and her abdomen convulsively, spasmodically rising and falling. Meanwhile from her throat were issuing moans which at times caused her yellow teeth to show bare like those of a wolf.

"What is the matter?" I said as I bent over her. "Has anyone assaulted you?"

The only result was that, shuffling bare feet in the sand like a fly, she shook her nerveless hand, and gasped:

"Away, villain! Away with you!"

Then I understood what was the matter, for I had seen a similar case before. Yet for the moment a certain feeling of shyness made me edge away from her a little; and as I did so, she uttered a prolonged moan, and her almost bursting eyeballs vented hot, murky tears which trickled down her tense and livid features.

Thereupon I turned to her again, and, throwing down cooking-pot, teapot, and wallet, laid her on her back, and strove to bend her knees upwards in the direction of her body. Meanwhile she sought to repel me with blows on face and breast, and at length rolled on to her stomach. Then, raising herself on all fours, she, sobbing, gasping, and cursing in a breath, crawled away like a bear into a remoter portion of the thicket.

"Beast!" she panted. "Oh, you devil!"

Yet, even as the words escaped her lips, her arms gave way beneath her, and she collapsed upon her face, with legs stretched out, and her lips emitting a fresh series of convulsive moans.

Excited now to fever pitch, I hurriedly recalled my small store of knowledge of such cases and finally decided to turn her on her back, and, as before, to strive to bend her knees upwards in the direction of her body. Already signs of imminent parturition were not wanting.

"Lie still," I said, "and if you do that it will not be long before you are delivered of the child."

Whereafter, running down to the sea, I pulled up my sleeves, and, on returning, embarked upon my role, of accoucheur.

Scoring the earth with her fingers, uprooting tufts of withered grass, and struggling to thrust them into her mouth, scattering soil over her terrible, inhuman face and bloodshot eyes, the woman writhed like a strip of birch bark in a wood fire. Indeed, by this time a little head was coming into view, and it needed all my efforts to quell the twitchings of her legs, to help the child to issue, and to prevent its mother from thrusting grass down her distorted, moaning throat. Meanwhile we cursed one another – she through her teeth, and I in an undertone; she, I should surmise, out of pain and shame, and I, I feel certain, out of nervousness, mingled with a perfect agony of compassion.

"O Lord!" she gasped with blue lips flecked with foam as her eyes (suddenly bereft of their colour in the sunlight) shed tears born of the intolerable anguish of the maternal function, and her body writhed and twisted as though her frame had been severed in the middle.

"Away, you brute!" was her oft-repeated cry as with her weak hands, hands seemingly dislocated at the wrists, she strove to thrust me to a distance. Yet all the time I kept saying persuasively: "You fool! Bring forth as quickly as you can!" and, as a matter of fact, was feeling so sorry for her that tears continued to spurt from my eyes as much as from hers, and my very heart contracted with pity. Also, never did I cease to feel that I ought to keep saying something; wherefore, I repeated, and again repeated: "Now then! Bring forth as quickly as ever you can!"

And at last my hands did indeed hold a human creature in all its pristine beauty. Nor could even the mist of tears prevent me from seeing that that human creature was red in the face, and that to judge from the manner in which it kept kicking and resisting and uttering hoarse wails (while still bound to its mother by the ligament), it was feeling dissatisfied in advance with the world. Yes, blue-eyed, and with a nose absurdly sunken between a pair of scarlet, rumpled cheeks and lips which ceaselessly quivered and contracted, it kept bawling: "A-aah! A-a-ah!"

Moreover, so slippery was it that, as I knelt and looked at it and laughed with relief at the fact that it had arrived safely, I came near to letting it fall upon the ground: wherefore I entirely forgot what next I ought to have done.

"Cut it!" at length whispered the mother with eyes closed, and features suddenly swollen and resembling those of a corpse.

"A knife!" again she whispered with her livid lips. "Cut it!"

My pocket-knife I had had stolen from me in the workmen's barraque; but with my teeth I severed the caul, and then the child gave renewed tongue in true Orlovian fashion, while the mother smiled. Also, in some curious fashion, the mother's unfathomable eyes regained their colour, and

became filled as with blue fire as, plunging a hand into her bodice and feeling for the pocket, she contrived to articulate with raw and blood-flecked lips:

"I have not a single piece of string or riband to bind the caul with."

Upon that I set to, and managed to produce a piece of riband, and to fasten it in the required position.

Thereafter she smiled more brightly than ever. So radiantly did she smile that my eyes came near to being blinded with the spectacle.

"And now rearrange yourself," I said, "and in the meanwhile I will go and wash the baby."

"Yes, yes," she murmured uneasily. "But be very careful with him – be very gentle."

Yet it was little enough care that the rosy little homunculus seemed to require, so strenuously did he clench his fists, and bawl as though he were minded to challenge the whole world to combat.

"Come, now!" at length I said. "You must have done, or your very head will drop off."

Yet no sooner did he feel the touch of the ocean spray, and begin to be sprinkled With its joyous caresses, than he lamented more loudly and vigorously than ever, and so continued throughout the process of being slapped on the back and breast as, frowning and struggling, he vented squall after squall while the waves laved his tiny limbs.

"Shout, young Orlovian!" said I encouragingly. "Let fly with all the power of your lungs!"

And with that, I took him back to his mother. I found her with eyes closed and lips drawn between her teeth as she writhed in the torment of expelling the after-birth. But presently I detected through the sighs and groans a whispered:

"Give him to me! Give him to me!"

"You had better wait a little," I urged.

"Oh no! Give him to me now!"

And with tremulous, unsteady hands she unhooked the bosom of her bodice, and, freeing (with my assistance) the breast which nature had prepared for at least a dozen children, applied the mutinous young Orlovian to the nipple. As for him, he at once understood the matter, and ceased to send forth further lamentation.

"O pure and holy Mother of God!" she gasped in a long-drawn, quivering sigh as she bent a dishevelled head over the little one, and, between intervals of silence, fell to uttering soft, abrupt exclamations. Then, opening her ineffably beautiful blue eyes, the hallowed eyes of a mother, she raised them towards the azure heavens, while in their depths there was coming and going a flame of joy and gratitude. Lastly, lifting a languid hand, she with a slow movement made the sign of the cross over both herself and her babe.

"Thanks to thee O purest Mother of God!" she murmured. "Thanks indeed to thee!"

Then her eyes grew dim and vague again, and after a pause (during which she seemed to be scarcely breathing) she said in a hard and matter-of-fact tone:

"Young fellow, unfasten my satchel."

And whilst I was so engaged she continued to regard me with a steady gaze; but, when the task was completed she smiled shamefacedly, and on her sunken cheeks and sweat-flecked temples there dawned the ghost of a blush.

"Now," said she, "do you, for the present, go away."

"And if I do so, see that in the meanwhile you do not move about too much."

"No, I will not. But please go away."

So I withdrew a little. In my breast a sort of weariness was lurking, but also in my breast there was echoing a soft and glorious chorus of birds, a chorus so exquisitely in accord with the never-ceasing splash of the sea that for ever could I have listened to it, and to the neighbouring brook as it purred on its way like a maiden engaged in relating confidences about her lover.

Presently, the woman's yellow-scarfed head (the scarf now tidily rearranged) reappeared over the bushes.

"Come, come, good woman!" was my exclamation. "I tell you that you must not move about so soon."

And certainly her attitude now was one of utter languor, and she had perforce to grasp the stem of a bush with one hand to support herself. Yet while the blood was gone from her face, there had formed in the hollows where her eyes had been two lakes of blue.

"See how he is sleeping!" she murmured.

And, true enough, the child was sound asleep, though to my eyes he looked much as any other baby might have done, save that the couch of autumn leaves on which he was ensconced consisted of leaves of a kind which could not have been discovered in the faraway forests of Orlov.

"Now, do you yourself lie down awhile," was my advice.

"Oh, no," she replied with a shake of her head on its sinuous neck; "for I must be collecting my things before I move on towards –"

"Towards Otchenchiri"

"Yes. By now my folk will have gone many a verst in that direction."

"And can you walk so far?"

"The Holy Mother will help me."

Yes, she was to journey in the company of the Mother of God. So no more on the point required to be said.

Glancing again at the tiny, inchoate face under the bushes, her eyes diffused rays of warm and kindly light as, licking her lips, she, with a slow movement, smoothed the breast of the little one.

Then I arranged sticks for a fire, and also adjusted stones to support the kettle.

"Soon I will have tea ready for you," I remarked.

"And thankful indeed I shall be," she responded, "for my breasts are dried up."

"Why have your companions deserted you?" I said next.

"They have not deserted me. It was I that left them of my own accord. How could I have exposed myself in their presence?"

And with a glance at me she raised a hand to her face as, spitting a gout of blood, she smiled a sort of bashful smile.

"This is your first child, I take it?"

"It is... And who are you?"

"A man."

"Yes, a man, of course; but, are you a MARRIED man?"

"No, I have never been able to marry."

"That cannot be true."

"Why not?"

With lowered eyes she sat awhile in thought.

"Because, if so, how do you come to know so much about women's affairs?"

This time I DID lie, for I replied:

"Because they have been my study. In fact, I am a medical student."

"Ah! Our priest's son also was a student, but a student for the Church."

"Very well. Then you know what I am. Now I will go and fetch some water."

Upon this she inclined her head towards her little son and listened for a moment to his breathing. Then she said with a glance towards the sea:

"I too should like to have a wash, but I do not know what the water is like. What is it? Brackish or salt?"

"No; quite good water – fit for you to wash in."

"Is it really?"

"Yes, really. Moreover, it is warmer than the water of the streams hereabouts, which is as cold as ice."

"Ah! Well, you know best."

Here a shaggy-eared pony, all skin and bone, was seen approaching us at a foot's pace. Trembling, and drooping its head, it scanned us, as it drew level, with a round black eye, and snorted. Upon that, its rider pushed back a ragged fur cap, glanced warily in our direction, and again sank his head.

"The folk of these parts are ugly to look at," softly commented the woman from Orlov.

Then I departed in quest of water. After I had washed my face and hands I filled the kettle from a stream bright and lively as quicksilver (a stream presenting, as the autumn leaves tossed in the eddies which went leaping and singing over the stones, a truly enchanting spectacle), and, returning, and peeping through the bushes, perceived the woman to be crawling on hands and knees over the stones, and anxiously peering about, as though in search of something.

"What is it?" I inquired, and thereupon, turning grey in the face with confusion she hastened to conceal some article under her person, although I had already guessed the nature of the article.

"Give it to me," was my only remark. "I will go and bury it."

"How so? For, as a matter of fact, it ought to be buried under the floor in front of some stove."

"Are we to build a stove HERE? Build it in five minutes?" I retorted.

"Ah, I was jesting. But really, I would rather not have it buried here, lest some wild beast should come and devour it... Yet it ought to be committed only to the earth."

That said, she, with averted eyes, handed me a moist and heavy bundle; and as she did so she said under her breath, with an air of confusion:

"I beg of you for Christ's sake to bury it as well, as deeply, as you can. Out of pity for my son do as I bid you."

I did as she had requested; and, just as the task had been completed, I perceived her returning from the margin of the sea with unsteady gait, and an arm stretched out before her, and a petticoat soaked to the middle with the sea water. Yet all her face was alight with inward fire, and as I helped her to regain the spot where I had prepared some sticks I could not help reflecting with some astonishment:

"How strong indeed she is!"

Next, as we drank a mixture of tea and honey, she inquired:

"Have you now ceased to be a student?"

"Yes."

"And why so? Through too much drink?"

"Even so, good mother."

"Dear me! Well, your face is familiar to me. Yes, I remember that I noticed you in Sukhum when once you were arguing with the barraque superintendent over the question of rations. As I did so the thought occurred to me: 'Surely that bold young fellow must have gone and spent his means on drink? Yes, that is how it must be.'"

Then, as from her swollen lips she licked a drop of honey, she again bent her blue eyes in the direction of the bush under which the slumbering, newly-arrived Orlovian was couched.

"How will he live?" thoughtfully she said with a sigh – then added:

"You have helped me, and I thank you. Yes, my thanks are yours, though I cannot tell whether or not your assistance will have helped HIM."

And, drinking the rest of her tea, she ate a morsel of bread, then made the sign of the cross. And subsequently, as I was putting up my things, she continued to rock herself to and fro, to give little starts and cries, and to gaze thoughtfully at the ground with eyes which had now regained their original colour. At last she rose to her feet.

"You are not going yet?" I queried protestingly.

"Yes, I must."

"But – "

"The Blessed Virgin will go with me. So please hand me over the child."

"No, I will carry him."

And, after a contest for the honour, she yielded, and we walked away side by side.

"I only wish I were a little steadier on my feet," she remarked with an apologetic smile as she laid a hand upon my shoulder.

Meanwhile, the new citizen of Russia, the little human being of an unknown future, was snoring soundly in my arms as the sea plashed and murmured, and threw off its white shavings, and the bushes whispered together, and the sun (now arrived at the meridian) shone brightly upon us all.

In calm content it was that we walked; save that now and then the mother would halt, draw a deep breath, raise her head, scan the sea and the forest and the hills, and peer into her son's face. And as she did so, even the mist begotten of tears of suffering could not dim the wonderful brilliancy and clearness of her eyes. For with the sombre fire of inexhaustible love were those eyes aflame.

Once, as she halted, she exclaimed:

"O God, O Mother of God, how good it all is! Would that for ever I could walk thus, yes, walk and walk unto the very end of the world! All that I should need would be that thou, my son, my darling son, shouldst, borne upon thy mother's breast, grow and wax strong!"

And the sea murmured and murmured.

## THE ICEBREAKER

On a frozen river near a certain Russian town, a gang of seven carpenters were hastily repairing an icebreaker which the townsfolk had stripped for firewood.

That year spring happened to be late in arriving, and youthful March looked more like October, and only at noon, and that not on every day, did the pale, wintry sun show himself in the overcast heavens, or, glimmering in blue spaces between clouds, contemplate the earth with a squinting, malevolent eye.

The day in question was the Friday in Holy Week, and, as night drew on, drippings were becoming congealed into icicles half an arshin long, and in the snow-stripped ice of the river only the dun hue of the wintry clouds was reflected.

As the carpenters worked there kept mournfully, insistently echoing from the town the coppersy note of bells; and at intervals heads would raise themselves, and blue eyes would gleam thoughtfully through the same grey fog in which the town lay enveloped, and an axe uplifted would hover a moment in the air as though fearing with its descent to cleave the luscious flood of sound.

Scattered over the spacious river-track were dark pine branches, projecting obliquely from the ice, to mark paths, open spaces, and cracks on the surface; and where they reared themselves aloft, these branches looked like the cramped, distorted arms of drowning men.

From the river came a whiff of gloom and depression. Covered over with sodden slush, it stretched with irksome rigidity towards the misty quarter whence blew a languid, sluggish, damp, cold wind.

Suddenly the foreman, one Ossip, a cleanly built, upright little peasant with a neatly curling, silvery beard, ruddy cheeks, and a flexible neck, a man everywhere and always in evidence, shouted: "Look alive there, my hearties!"

Presently he turned his attention to myself, and smiled insinuatingly.

"Inspector," he said, "what are you trying to poke out of the sky with that squat nose of yours? And why are you here at all? You come from the contractor, you say? – from Vasili Sergeitch? Well, well! Then your job is to hurry us up, to keep barking out, 'Mind what you are doing, such-and-such gang!' Yet there you stand-blinking over your task like an object dried stiff! It's not to blink that you're here, but to play the watchdog upon us, and to keep an eye open, and your tongue on the wag. So issue your commands, young cockerel."

Then he shouted to the workmen:

"Now, then! No shirking! Is the job going to be finished tonight, or is it not?"

As a matter of fact, he himself was the worst shirker in the artel [Workman's union]. True, he was also a first-rate hand at his trade, and a man who could work quickly and well and with skill and concentration; but, unfortunately, he hated putting himself out, and preferred to spend his time spinning arresting yarns. For instance, on the present occasion he chose the moment when work was proceeding with a swing, when everyone was busily and silently and wholeheartedly labouring with the object of running the job through to the end, to begin in his musical voice:

"Look here, lads. Once upon a time –"

And though for the first two or three minutes the men appeared not to hear him, and continued their planing and chopping as before, the moment came when the soft tenor accents caught and held the men's attention, as they trickled and bubbled forth. Then, screwing up his bright eyes with a humorous air, and twisting his curly beard between his fingers, Ossip gave a complacent click of his tongue, and continued measuredly, and with deliberation:

"So he seized hold of the tench, and thrust it back into the cave. And as he turned to proceed through the forest he thought to himself: 'Now I must keep my eyes about me.' And suddenly, from somewhere (no one could have said where), a woman's voice shrieked: 'Elesi-a-ah! Elesia-ah!'"

Here a tall, lanky Morduine named Leuka, with, as surname, Narodetz, a young fellow whose small eyes wore always an expression of astonishment, laid aside his axe, and stood gaping.

"And from the cave a deep bass voice replied: 'Elesi-a-ah!' while at the same moment the tench sprang from the cave, and, champing its jaws, wriggled and wriggled back to the slough."

Here an old soldier named Saniavin, a morose man, a tippler, and a sufferer from asthma and an inexplicable grudge against life in general, croaked out:

"How could your tench have wriggled across dry land if it was a fish?"

"Can, for that matter, a fish speak?" was Ossip's good-humoured retort.

All of which inspired Mokei Budirin, a grey-headed muzhik of a cast of countenance canine in the prominence of his jaws and the recession of his forehead, and taciturn withal, though not otherwise remarkable, to give slow, nasal utterance to his favourite formula.

"That is true enough," he said.

For never could anything be spoken of that was grim or marvellous or lewd or malicious, but Budirin at once re-echoed softly, but in a tone of unshakable conviction: "That is true enough."

Thereafter he would tap me on the breast with his hard and ponderous fist.

Presently work again underwent an interruption through the fact that Yakov Boev, a man who possessed both a stammer and a squint, became similarly filled with a desire to tell us something about a fish. Yet from the moment that he began his narrative everyone declined to believe it, and laughed at his broken verbiage as, frequently invoking the Deity, and cursing, and brandishing his awl, and viciously swallowing spittle, he shouted amid general ridicule:

"Once-upon a time there lived a man. Yes, other folk before YOU have believed my tale. Indeed, it is no more than the truth that I'm going to tell you. Very well! Cackle away, and be damned!"

Here everyone without exception dropped his work to shout with merriment and clap his hands: with the result that, doffing his cap, and thereby disclosing a silvered, symmetrically shaped head with one bald spot amid its one dark portion, Ossip was forced to shout severely:

"Hi, you Budirin! You've had your say, and given us some fun, and there must be no more of it."

"But I had only just begun what I want to say," the old soldier grumbled, spitting upon the palms of his hands.

Next, Ossip turned to myself.

"Inspector," he began...

It is my opinion that in thus hindering the men from work through his tale-telling, Ossip had some definite end in view. I could not say precisely what that end was, but it must have been the object either of cloaking his own laziness or of giving the men a rest. On the other hand, whenever the contractor was present he, Ossip, bore himself with humble obsequiousness, and continued to assume a guise of simplicity which none the less did not prevent him, on the advent of each Saturday, from inducing his employer to bestow a *pourboire* upon the *artel*.

And though this same Ossip was an *artelui*, and a director of the *artel*, his senior co-members bore him no affection, but, rather, looked upon him as a wag or trifler, and treated him as of no importance. And, similarly, the younger members of the *artel* liked well enough to listen to his tales, but declined to take him seriously, and, in some cases, regarded him with ill-concealed, or openly expressed, distrust.

Once the Morduine, a man of education with whom, on occasions, I held discussions on intimate subjects, replied to a question of mine on the subject of Ossip:

"I scarcely know. Goodness alone knows! No, I do not know anything about him."

To which, after a pause, he added:

"Once a fellow named Mikhailo, a clever fellow who is now dead, insulted Ossip by saying to him: 'Do you call yourself a man? Why, regarded as a workman, you're as lifeless as a doornail, while, seeing that you weren't born to be a master, you'll all your life continue chattering in corners, like a plummet swinging at the end of a string!' Yes, and that was true enough."

Lastly, after another pause the Morduine concluded:

"No matter. He is not such a bad sort."

My own position among these men was a position of some awkwardness, for, a young fellow of only fifteen, I had been appointed by the contractor, a distant relative of mine, to the task of superintending the expenditure of material. That is to say, I had to see to it that the carpenters did not make away with nails, or dispose of planks in return for drink. Yet all the time my presence was practically useless, seeing that the men stole nails as though I were not even in existence and strove to show me that among them I was a person too many, a sheer incubus, and seized every opportunity of giving me covert jogs with a beam, and similarly affronting me.

This, of course, made my relations with them highly difficult, embarrassing, and irksome; and though moments occurred when I longed to say something that might ingratiate me, and endeavoured to effect an advance in that direction, the words always failed me at the necessary juncture, and I found myself lying crushed as before under a burdensome sense of the superfluity of my existence.

Again, if ever I tried to make an entry as to some material which had been used, Ossip would approach me, and, for instance, say:

"Is it jotted down, eh? Then let me look at it."

And, eyeing the notebook with a frown, he would add vaguely:

"What a nice hand you write!" (He himself could write only in printing fashion, in the large scriptory characters of the Ecclesiastical Rubric, not in those of the ordinary kind.)

"For example, that scoop there – what does IT say?"

"It is the word 'Good.'"

"'Good'? But what a slip-knot of a thing! And what are those words THERE, on THAT line?"

"They say, 'Planks, 1 vershok by 9 arshini, 5.'"

"No, six was the number used."

"No, five."

"Five? Why, the soldier broke one, didn't he?"

"Yes, but never mind – at least it wasn't a plank that was wanted."

"Oh! Well, I may tell you that he took the two pieces to the tavern to get drink with."

Then, glancing into my face with his cornflower-blue eyes and quiet, quizzical smile, he would say without the least confusion as he twisted the ringlets of his beard:

"Put down '6.' And see here, young cockerel. The weather has turned wet and cold, and the work is hard, and sometimes folk need to have their spirits cheered and raised with a drop of liquor. So don't you be too hard upon us, for God won't think the more of you for being strict."

And as he thus talked to me in his slow and kindly, but semi-affected, fashion – bespattering me, as it were, with wordy sawdust – I would suddenly grow blind of an eye and silently show him the corrected figure.

"That's it – that's right. And how fine the figure looks now, as it squats there like a merchant's buxom, comely dame!"

Then he would be seen triumphantly telling his mates of his success; then, I would find myself feeling acutely conscious of the fact that everyone was despising me for my complacence. Yes, grown sick beyond endurance with a yearning for some thing which it could not descry, my fifteen-year-old heart would dissolve in a flood of mortified tears, and there would pass through my brain the despondent, aching thought:

"Oh, what a sad, uncomfortable world is this! How should Ossip have known so well that I should not re-correct the 6 into a 5, or that I should not tell the contractor that the men have bartered a plank for liquor?"

Again, there befell an occasion when the men stole two pounds' weight of five vershok mandrels and bolts.

"Look here," I said to Ossip warningly. "I am going to report this."

"All right," he agreed with a twitch of his grey eyebrows. "Though what such a trifle can matter I fail to see. Yes, go and report every mother's son of them."

And to the men themselves he shouted:

"Hi, boobies! Each of you now stands docked for some mandrels and bolts."

"Why?" was the old soldier's grim inquiry.

"Because you DO so stand," carelessly retorted the other.

With snarls thereafter, the men eyed me covertly, until I began to feel that very likely I should not do as I had threatened, and even that so to do might not be expedient.

"But look here," said I to Ossip. "I am going to give the contractor notice, and let all of you go to the devil. For if I were to remain with you much longer I too should become a thief."

Ossip stroked his beard awhile, and pondered. Then he seated himself beside me, and said in an undertone:

"That is true."

"Well?"

"But things are always so. The truth is that it's time you departed. What sort of a watchman, of a checker, are you? In jobs of this kind what a man needs to know is the meaning of property. He needs to have in him the spirit of a dog, so that he shall look after his master's stuff as he would look after the skin which his mother has put on to his own body. But you, you young puppy, haven't the slightest notion of what property means. In fact, were anyone to go and tell Vasili Sergeitch about the way in which you keep letting us off, he'd give it you in the neck. Yes, you're no good to him at all, but just an expense: whereas when a man serves a master he ought, do you understand, to be PROFITABLE to that master."

He rolled and handed me a cigarette.

"Smoke this," said he, "and perhaps it'll make your brain work easier. If only you had been of a less awkward, uncomfortable nature, I should have said to you, 'Go and join the priests; but, as things are, you aren't the right sort for that – you're too stiff and unbending, and would never make headway even with an abbot. No, you're not the sort to play cards with. A monk is like a jackdaw – he chatters without knowing what he is chattering about, and pays no heed to the root of things, so busy is he with stuffing himself full with the grain. I say this to you with absolute earnestness, for I perceive you to be strange to our ways – a cuckoo that has blundered into the wrong nest."

And, doffing his cap, a gesture which he never failed to execute when he had something particularly important to say, he added humbly and sonorously as he glanced at the grey firmament:

"In the sight of the Lord our ways are the ways of thieves, and such as will never gain of Him salvation."

"And that is true enough," responded Mokei Budirin after the fashion of a clarionet.

From that time forth, Ossip of the curly, silvered head, bright eyes, and shadowy soul became an object of agreeable interest for me. Indeed, there grew up between us a species of friendship, even though I could see that a civil bearing towards me in public was a thing that it hurt him to maintain. At all events, in the presence of others he avoided my glance, and his eyes, clear, unsullied, and bright blue in tint, wavered unsteadily, and his lips twitched and assumed an artificially unpleasant expression, while he uttered some such speech as:

"Hi, you Makarei, see that you keep your eyes open, and cam your pay, or that pig of a soldier will be making away with more nails!"

But at other times, when we were alone together, he would speak to me kindly and instructively, while his eyes would dance and gleam with a faint, grave, knowing smile, and dart blue rays direct into mine, while for my part, as I listened to his words, I took every one of them to be absolutely true and balanced, despite their strange delivery.

"A man's duty consists in being good," I remarked on one occasion.

"Yes, of course," assented Ossip, though the next moment he veiled his eyes with a smile, and added in an undertone: "But what do you understand by the term 'good'? In my opinion, unless virtue be to their advantage, folk spit upon that 'goodness,' that 'honourableness,' of yours. Hence, the better plan is to pay folk court, and be civil to them, and flatter and cajole every mother's son of them. Yes, do that, and your 'goodness' will have a chance of bringing you in some return. Not that I do not say that to be 'good,' to be able to look your own ugly jowl in the face in a mirror, is pleasant enough; but, as I see the matter, it is all one to other people whether you be a cardsharper or a priest so long as you're polite, and let down your neighbours lightly. That's what they want."

For my part I never, at that period, grew weary of watching my fellows, for it was my constant idea that some day one of them would be able to raise me to a higher level, and to bring me to an understanding of this unintelligible and complicated existence of ours. Hence I kept asking myself the restless, the importunate question:

"What precisely is the human soul?"

Certain souls, I thought, existed which seemed like balls of copper, for, solid and immovable, they reflected things from their own point of view alone, in a dull and irregular and distorted fashion. And souls, I thought, existed which seemed as flat as mirrors, and, for all intents and purposes, had no existence at all.

And in every case the human soul seemed formless, like a cloud, and as murkily mutable as an imitation opal, a thing which altered according to the colour of what adjoined it.

Only as regarded the soul of the intelligent Ossip was I absolutely at a loss, absolutely unable to reach a conclusion.

Pondering these and similar matters in my mind, I, on the day of which I speak, stood gazing at the river, and at the town under the hill, as I listened to the bells. Rearing themselves aloft like the organ pipes in my favourite Polish-Roman Catholic church, the steeples of the town had their crosses dimly sparkling as though the latter had been stars imprisoned in a murky sky. Yet it was as though those stars hoped eventually to ascend into the purer firmament above the wind-torn clouds that they sparkled; and as I stood watching the clouds glide onward, and momentarily efface with their shadows, the town's multifarious hues, I marked the fact that although, whenever dark-blue cavities in their substance permitted the beams of the sun to illuminate the buildings below, those buildings' roofs assumed tints of increased cheerfulness. The clouds seemed to glide the faster to veil the beams, while the humid shadows grew more opaque – and the scene darkened as though only for a moment had it assumed a semblance of joy.

The buildings of the town (looking like heaps of muddy snow), the black, naked earth around those buildings, the trees in the gardens, the hummocks of piled-up soil, the dull grey glimmer of the window panes of the houses – all these things reminded me of winter, even though the misty breath of the northern spring was beginning to steal over the whole.

Presently a young fellow with flaxen hair, a pendent underlip, and a tall, ungainly figure, by name Mishuk Diatlov, essayed to troll the stanza:

"That morn to him the maiden came,  
To find his soul had fled."

Whereupon the old soldier shouted:

"Hi, you! Have you forgotten the day?"

And even Boev saw fit to take umbrage at the singing, and, threatening Diatlov with his fist, to rap out:

"Ah, sobatchnia dusha!" ["Soul of a dog."]

"What a rude, rough, primitive lot we Russians are!" commented Ossip, seating himself atop of the icebreaker, and screwing up his eyes to measure its fall. "To speak plainly, we Russians are sheer

barbarians. Once upon a time, I may tell you, an anchorite happened to be on his travels; and as the people came pressing around him, and kneeling to him, and tearfully beseeching him with the words, 'Oh holy father, intercede for us with the wolves which are devouring our substance!' he replied: 'Ha! Are you, or are you not, Orthodox Christians? See that I assign you not to condign perdition!' Yes, angry, in very truth he was. Nay, he even spat in the people's faces. Yet in reality he was a kindly old man, for his eyes kept shedding tears equally with theirs."

Twenty sazheni below the icebreaker was a gang of barefooted sailors, engaged in hacking out the floes from under their barges; and as they shattered the brittle, greyish-blue crust on the river, the mattocks rang out, and the sharp blades of the icecutters gleamed as they thrust the broken fragments under the surface. Meanwhile, there could be heard a bubbling of water, and the sound of rivulets trickling down to the sandy margin of the river. And similarly among our own gang was there audible a scraping of planes, and a screeching of saws, and a clattering of iron braces as they were driven into the smooth yellow wood, while through all the web of these sounds there ran the ceaseless song of the bells, a song so softened by distance as to thrill the soul, much as though dingy, burdensome labour were holding revel in honour of spring, and calling upon the latter to spread itself over the starved, naked surface of the gradually thawing ground.

At this point someone shouted hoarsely:

"Go and fetch the German. We have not got hands enough."

And from the bank someone bawled in reply:

"Where IS he?"

"In the tavern. That is where you must go and look for him."

And as they made themselves heard, the voices floated up turgidly into the sodden air, spread themselves over the river's mournful void, and died away.

Meanwhile our men worked with industry and speed, but not without a fault or two, for their thoughts were fixed upon the town and its washhouses and churches. And particularly restless was Sashok Diatlov, a man whose hair, as flaxen as that of his brother, seemed to have been boiled in lye. At intervals, glancing up-river, this well-built, sturdy young fellow would say softly to his brother:

"It's cracking now, eh?"

And, certainly, the ice had "moved" two nights ago, so that since yesterday morning the river watchmen had refused to permit horsed vehicles to cross, and only a few beadlike pedestrians now were making their way along the marked-out ice paths, while, as they proceeded, one could hear the water slapping against the planks as the latter bent under the travellers' weight.

"Yes, it IS cracking," at length Mishuk replied with a hoist of his ginger eyebrows.

Ossip too scanned the river from under his hand. Then he said to Mishuk:

"Pah! It is the dry squeak of the planes in your own hand that you keep hearing, so go on with your work, you son of a beldame. And as for you, Inspector, do you help me to speed up the men instead of burying your nose in your notebook."

By this time there remained only two more hours for work, and the arch of the icebreaker had been wholly sheathed in butter-tinted scantlings, and nothing required to be added to it save the great iron braces. Unfortunately, Boev and Saniavin, the men who had been engaged upon the task of cutting out the sockets for the braces, had worked so amiss, and run their lines so straight, that, when it came to the point, the arms of the braces refused to sink properly into the wood.

"Oh, you cock-eyed fool of a Morduine!" shouted Ossip, smiting his fist against the side of his cap. "Do you call THAT sort of thing work?"

At this juncture there came from somewhere on the bank a seemingly exultant shout of:

"Ah! NOW it's giving way!"

And almost at the same moment, there stole over the river a sort of rustle, a sort of quiet crunching which made the projecting pine branches quiver as though they were trying to catch at

something, while, shouldering their mattocks, the barefooted sailors noisily hastened aboard their barges with the aid of rope ladders.

And then curious indeed was it to see how many people suddenly came into view on the river – to see how they appeared to issue from below the very ice itself, and, hurrying to and fro like jackdaws startled by the shot of a gun, to dart hither and thither, and to seize up planks and boathooks, and to throw them down again, and once more to seize them up.

"Put the tools together," Ossip shouted. "And look alive there, and make for the bank."

"Aye, and a fine Easter Day it will be for us on THAT bank!" growled Sashok.

Meanwhile, it was the river rather than the town that seemed to be motionless – the latter had begun, as it were, to quiver and reel, and, with the hill above it, to appear to be gliding slowly up stream, even as the grey, sandy bank some ten sazheni from us was beginning to grow tremulous, and to recede.

"Run, all of you!" shouted Ossip, giving me a violent push as he did so. Then to myself in particular he added: "Why stand gaping there?"

This caused a keen sense of danger to strike home in my heart, and to make my feet feel as though already the ice was escaping their tread. So, automatically picking themselves up, those feet started to bear my body in the direction of a spot on the sandy bank where the winter-stripped branches of a willow tree were writhing, and whither there were betaking themselves also Boev, the old soldier, Budirin, and the brothers Diatlov. Meanwhile the Morduine ran by my side, cursing vigorously as he did so, and Ossip followed us, walking backwards.

"No, no, Narodetz," he said.

"But, my good Ossip – "

"Never mind. What has to be, has to be."

"But, as likely as not, we may remain stuck here for two days!"

"Never mind even if we DO remain stuck here."

"But what of the festival?"

"It will have, for this year at least, to be kept without you."

Seating himself on the sand, the old soldier lit his pipe and growled:

"What cowards you all are! The bank was only fifteen sazheni from us, yet you ran as though possessed!"

"With you yourself as leader," put in Mokei.

The old soldier took no notice, but added:

"What were you all afraid of? Once upon a time Christ Himself, Our Little Father, died."

"And rose again," muttered the Morduine with a tinge of resentment. Which led Boev to exclaim:

"Puppy, hold your tongue! What right have you to air your opinions?"

"Besides, this is Good Friday, not Easter Day," the old soldier concluded with severe, didactical mien.

In a gap of blue between the clouds there was shining the March sun, and everywhere the ice was sparkling as though in derision of ourselves. Shading his eyes, Ossip gazed at the dissolving river, and said:

"Yes, it IS rising – but that will not last for long."

"No, but long enough to make us miss the festival," grumbled Sashok.

Upon this the smooth, beardless face of the youthful Morduine, a face dark and angular like the skin of an unpeeled potato, assumed a resentful frown, and, blinking his eyes, he muttered:

"Yes, here we may have to sit – here where there's neither food nor money! Other folk will be enjoying themselves, but we shall have to remain hugging our hungry stomachs like a pack of dogs!"

Meanwhile Ossip's eyes had remained fixed upon the river, for evidently his thoughts were far away, and it was in absentminded fashion that he replied:

"Hunger cannot be considered where necessity impels. By the way, what use are our damned icebreakers? For the protection of barges and such? Why, the ice hasn't the sense to care. It just goes sliding over a barge, and farewell is the word to THAT bit of property!"

"Damn it, but none of us have a barge for property, have we?"

"You had better go and talk to a fool."

"The truth is that the icebreaker ought to have been taken in hand sooner."

Finally, the old soldier made a queer grimace, and ejaculated:

"Blockhead!"

From a barge a knot of sailors shouted something, and at the same moment the river sent forth a sort of whiff of cruel chilliness and brooding calm. The disposition of the pine boughs now had changed. Nay, everything in sight was beginning to assume a different air, as though everything were charged with tense expectancy.

One of the younger men asked diffidently, beneath his breath:

"Mate Ossip, what are we going to do?"

"What do you say?" Ossip queried absent-mindedly.

"I say, what are we going to do? Just to sit here?"

To this Boev responded, with loud, nasal derision in his tone:

"Yes, my lad, for the Lord has seen fit to prevent you from participating in His most holy festival."

And the old soldier, in support of his mate, extended his pipe towards the river, and muttered with a grin:

"You want to cross to the town, do you? Well, be off with you, and though the ice may give way beneath your feet and drown you, at least you'll be taken to the police station, and so get to your festival. For that's what you want, I suppose?"

"True enough," Mokei re-echoed.

Then the sun went in, and the river grew darker, while the town stood out more clearly. Ceaselessly, the younger men gazed towards the town with wistful, gloomy eyes, though silently they remained where they were.

Similarly, I myself was beginning to find things irksome and uncomfortable, as always happens when a number of companions are thinking different thoughts, and contain in themselves none of that unity of will which alone can join men into a direct, uniform force. Rather, I felt as though I could gladly leave my companions and start out upon the ice alone.

Suddenly Ossip recovered his faculties. Rising, then doffing his cap and making the sign of the cross in the direction of the town, he said with a quiet, simple, yet somehow authoritative, air:

"Very well, my mates. Go in peace, and may the Lord go with you!"

"But whither?" asked Sashok, leaping to his feet. "To the town?"

"Whither else?"

The old soldier was the only one not to rise, and with conviction he remarked:

"It will result but in our getting drowned."

"Then stay where you are."

Ossip glanced around the party. Then he continued:

"Bestir yourselves! Look alive!"

Upon which all crowded together, and Boev, thrusting the tools into a hole in the bank, groaned:

"The order 'go' has been given, so go we MUST, well though a man in receipt of such an order might ask himself, 'How is it going to be done?'"

Ossip seemed, in some way, to have grown younger and more active, while the habitually shy, though good-humoured, expression of his countenance was gone from his ruddy features, and his darkened eyes had assumed an air of stern activity. Nay, even his indolent, rolling gait had

disappeared, and in his step there was more firmness, more assurance, than had ever before been the case.

"Let every man take a plank," he said, "and hold it in front of him. Then, should anyone fall in (which God forbid!), the plank-ends will catch upon the ice to either side of him, and hold him up. Also, every man must avoid cracks in the ice. Yes, and is there a rope handy? Here, Narodetz! Reach me that spirit-level. Is everyone ready? I will walk first, and next there must come – well, which is the heaviest? – you, soldier, and then Mokei, and then the Morduine, and then Boev, and then Mishuk, and then Sashok, and then Makarei, the lightest of all. And do you all take off your caps before starting, and say a prayer to the Mother of God. Ha! Here is Old Father Sun coming out to greet us."

Readily did the men bare their tousled grey or flaxen heads as momentarily the sun glanced through a bank of thin white vapour before again concealing himself, as though averse to arousing any false hopes.

"Now!" sharply commanded Ossip in his new-found voice. "And may God go with us! Watch my feet, and don't crowd too much upon one another, but keep each at a sazhen's distance or more – in fact, the more the better. Yes, come, mates!"

With which, stuffing his cap into his bosom, and grasping the spirit-level in his hands, Ossip set foot upon the ice with a sliding, cautious, shuffling gait. At the same moment, there came from the bank behind us a startled cry of:

"Where are you off to, you fools?"

"Never mind," said Ossip to ourselves. "Come along with you, and don't stand staring."

"You blockheads!" the voice repeated. "You had far better return."

"No, no! come on!" was Ossip's counter-command. "And as you move think of God, or you'll never find yourselves among the invited guests at His holy festival of Eastertide."

Next Ossip sounded a police whistle, which act led the old soldier to exclaim:

"Oh, that's the way, mate! Good! Yes, you know what to do. Now notice will have been given to the police on the further bank, and, if we're not drowned, we shall find ourselves clapped in gaol when we get there. However, I'm not responsible."

In spite of this remonstrance, Ossip's sturdy voice drew his companions after him as though they had been tied to a rope.

"Watch your feet carefully," once more he cried.

Our line of march was directed obliquely, and in the opposite direction to the current. Also, I, as the rearmost of the party, found it pleasant to note how the wary little Ossip of the silvery head went looping over the ice with the deftness of a hare, and practically no raising of the feet, while behind him there trailed, in wild-goose fashion, and as though tied to a single invisible string, six dark and undulating figures the shadows of which kept making themselves visible on the ice, from those figures' feet to points indefinitely remote. And as we proceeded, all of us kept our heads lowered as though we had been descending from a mountain in momentary fear of a false step.

Also, though the shouting in our rear kept growing in volume, and we could tell that by this time a crowd had gathered, not a word could we distinguish, but only a sort of ugly din.

In time our cautious march became for me a mere, mechanical, wearisome task, for on ordinary occasions it was my custom to maintain a pace of greater rapidity. Thus, eventually I sank into the semiconscious condition amid which the soul turns to vacuity, and one no longer thinks of oneself, but, on the contrary issues from one's personality, and begins to see objects with unwonted clarity, and to hear sounds with unwonted precision. Under my feet the seams in the blue-grey, leaden ice lay full of water, while as for the ice itself, it was blinding in its expansive glitter, even though in places it had come to be either cracked or bulbous, or had ground itself into powder with its own movement, or had become heaped into slushy hummocks of pumice-like sponginess and the consistency of broken glass. And everywhere around me I could discern the chilly, gaping smile of blue crevices which caught at my feet, and rendered the tread of my boot-soles unstable. And ever, as we marched, could

the voices of Boev and the old soldier be heard speaking in antiphony, like two pipes being fluted by one and the same pair of lips.

"I won't be responsible," said the one voice.

"Nor I," responded the other.

"The only reason why I have come is that I was told to do so. That's all about it."

"Yes, and the same with me."

"One man gives an order, and another man, perhaps a man a thousand times more sensible than he, is forced to obey it."

"Is any man, in these days, sensible, seeing what a racket we have to live among?"

By this time Ossip had tucked the skirts of his greatcoat into his belt, while beneath those skirts his legs (clad in grey cloth gaiters of a military pattern) were shuffling along as lightly and easily as springs, and in a manner that suggested that there was turning and twisting in front of him some person whom, though desirous of barring to him the direct course, the shortest route, Ossip successfully opposed and evaded by dint of dodges and deviations to right and left, and occasional turns about, and the execution of dance steps and loops and semicircles. Meanwhile in the tones of Ossip's voice there was a soft, musical ring that struck agreeably upon the ear, and harmonised to admiration with the song of the bells just when we were approaching the middle of the river's breadth of four hundred sazheni. There resounded over the surface of the ice a vicious rustle while a piece of ice slid from under my feet. Stumbling, and powerless to retain my footing, I blundered down upon my knees in helpless astonishment; and then, as I glanced upstream, fear gripped at my throat, deprived me of speech, and darkened all my vision. For the whole substance of the grey ice-core had come to life and begun to heave itself upwards! Yes, the hitherto level surface was thrusting forth sharp angular ridges, and the air seemed full of a strange sound like the trampling of some heavy being over broken glass.

With a quiet trickle there came a swirl of water around me, while an adjacent pine bough cracked and squeaked as though it too had come to life. My companions shouted, and collected into a knot; whereupon, at once dominating and quelling the tense, painful hubbub of sounds, there rang forth the voice of Ossip.

"Mother of God!" he shouted. "Scatter, lads! Get away from one another, and keep each to himself! Now! Courage!"

With that, springing towards us as though wasps had been after him, and grasping the spirit-level as though it had been a weapon, he jabbed it to every side, as though fighting invisible foes, while, just as the quivering town began, seemingly, to glide past us, and the ice at my feet gave a screech and crumbled to fragments beneath me, so that water bubbled to my knees. I leapt up from where I was, and rushed blindly in Ossip's direction.

"Where are you coming to, fool?" was his shout as he brandished the spirit-level. "Stand still where you are!"

Indeed, Ossip seemed no longer to be Ossip at all, but a person curiously younger, a person in whom all that had been familiar in Ossip had become effaced. Yes, the once blue eyes had turned to grey, and the figure added half an arshin to its stature as, standing as erect as a newly made nail, and pressing both feet together, the foreman stretched himself to his full height, and shouted with his mouth open to its widest extent:

"Don't shuffle about, nor crowd upon one another, or I'll break your heads!"

Whereafter, of myself in particular, he inquired as he raised the spirit-level:

"What is the matter with YOU, pray?"

"I am feeling frightened," I muttered in response.

"Feeling frightened of WHAT, indeed?"

"Of being drowned."

"Pooh! Just you hold your tongue."

Yet the next moment he glanced at me, and added in a gentler, quieter tone:

"None but a fool gets drowned. Pick yourself up and come along."

Then once more he shouted full-throated words of encouragement to his men; and as he did so, his chest swelled and his head rocked with the effort.

Yet, crackling and cracking, the ice was breaking up; and soon it began slowly to bear us past the town. 'Twas as though some unknown force ashore had awakened, and was striving to tear the banks of the river in two, so much did the portion of the landscape downstream seem to be standing still while the portion level with us seemed to be receding in the opposite direction, and thus causing a break to take place in the middle of the picture.

And soon this movement, a movement agonisingly slow, deprived me of my sense of being connected with the rest of the world, until, as the whole receded, despair again gripped my heart and unnerved my limbs. Roseate clouds were gliding across the sky and causing stray fragments of the ice, which, seemingly, yearned to engulf me, to assume reflected tints of a similar hue. Yes, it was as though the birth of spring had reawakened the universe, and was causing it to stretch itself, and to emit deep, hurried, broken pants that cracked its bones as the river, embedded in the earth's stout framework, revived the whole with thick, turbulent, ebullient blood.

And this sense of littleness, of impotence amid the calm, assured movement of the earth's vast bulk, weighed upon my soul, and evoked, and momentarily fanned to flame in me, the shameless human question: "What if I should stretch forth my hand and lay it upon the hill and the banks of the river, and say, 'Halt until I come to you!'?"

Meanwhile the bells continued the mournful moaning of their resonant, coppersy notes; and that moaning led me to reflect that within two days (on the night of the morrow) they would be pealing a joyous welcome to the Resurrection Feast.

"Oh that all of us may live to hear that sound!" was my unspoken thought.

Before my vision there kept quavering seven dark figures – figures shuffling over the ice, and brandishing planks like oars. And, wriggling like a lamprey in front of them was a little old fellow, an old fellow resembling Saint Nicholas the Wonder-Worker, an old fellow who kept crying softly, but authoritatively:

"Do not stare about you!"

And ever the river was growing rougher and ruder; ever its backbone was beginning to pucker and flounder like a whale underfoot, with its liquescent body of cold, grey, murky water bursting with increasing frequency from its shell of ice, and lapping hungrily at our feet.

Yes, we were human beings traversing, as it were, a slender pole over a bottomless abyss; and as we walked, the water's soft, cantabile splash set me in mind of the depths below, of the infinite time during which a body would continue sinking through dense, chilly bulk until sight faded and the heart stopped beating. Yes, before my mind's eye there arose men drowned and devoured by crayfish, men with crumbling skulls and swollen features, and glassy, bulging eyes and puffy hands and outstretched fingers and palms of which the skin had rotted off with the damp.

The first to fall in was Mokei Budirin. He had been walking next ahead of the Morduine, and, as a man habitually silent and absorbed, proceeding on his way more quietly than the rest. Suddenly something had seemed to catch at his legs, and he had disappeared until only his head and his hands, as the latter clutched at his plank, had been left above-level.

"Run and help him, somebody!" was Ossip's instant cry. "Yes, but not all of you – just one or two. Help him I say!"

The spluttering Mokei, however, said to the Morduine and myself:

"No; do you move away, mates, for I shall best help myself. Never you mind."

And, sure enough, he did succeed in drawing himself out on to the ice without assistance. Whereafter he remarked as he shook himself:

"A nice pickle, this, to be in! I might as well have been drowned!"

And, in fact, at the moment he looked, with his chattering teeth and great tongue licking a dripping moustache, precisely like a large, good-natured dog.

Then I remembered how, a month earlier, he had accidentally driven the blade of his axe through the joint of his left thumb, and, merely picking up the white fragment of flesh with the nail turning blue, and scanning it with his unfathomable eyes, had remarked, as though it was he himself that had been at fault:

"How often before I have injured that thumb, I could not say. And when once I dislocated it, I went on working with it longer than was right... Now I will go and bury it."

With which, carefully wrapping up the fragment in some shavings, he had thrust the whole into his pocket, and bandaged the wounded hand.

Similarly, after that, did Boev, the man next in order behind Mokei, contrive to wrest himself from the grasp of the ice, though, on immersion, he started bawling, "Mates, I shall drown! I am dead already! Help me, help me!" and became so cramped with terror as to be extricated only with great difficulty, while amid the general confusion the Morduine too nearly slipped into the water.

"A narrow shave of saying Vespers tonight with the devils in Hell!" he remarked as he clambered back, and stood grinning with an even more angular and attenuated appearance than usual.

The next moment Boev achieved a second plunge, and screamed, as before, for help.

"Don't shout, you goat of a Yashka!" Ossip exclaimed as he threatened him with the spirit-level. "Why scare people? I'll give it you! Look here, lads. Let every man take off his belt and turn out his pockets. Then he'll walk lighter."

Toothed jaws gaped and crunched at us at every step, and vomited thick spittle; at every tenth step their keen blue fangs reached for our lives. Meanwhile, the soaked condition of our boots and clothes had rendered us as slimy as though smeared with paste. Also, it so weighed us down as to hinder any active movement, and to cause each step to be taken cautiously, slowly, silently, and with ponderous diffidence.

Yet, soaked though we were, Ossip might verily have known the number of cracks in advance, so smooth and harelike was his progress from floe to floe as at intervals he faced about, watched us, and cried sonorously:

"That's the way to do it, eh?"

Yes, he absolutely played with the river, and though it kept catching at his diminutive form, he always evaded it, circumvented its movements, and avoided its snares. Nay, capable even of directing its trend did he seem, and of thrusting under our feet only the largest and firmest floes.

"Lads, there is no need to be downhearted," he would cry at intervals.

"Ah, that brave Ossip!" the Morduine once ejaculated. "In very truth is he a man, and no mistake! Just look at him!"

The closer we approached the further shore, the thinner and the more brittle did the ice become, and the more liable we to break through it. By this time the town had nearly passed us, and we were bidding fair to be carried out into the Volga, where the ice would still be sound, and, as likely as not, draw us under itself.

"By your leave, we are going to be drowned," the Morduine murmured as he glanced at the blue shadow of eventide on our left.

And simultaneously, as though compassionating our lot, a large floe grounded upon the bank, glided upwards with a cracking and a crashing, and there held fast!

"Run, all of you!" came a furious shout from Ossip. "Hurry up, now! Put your very best legs foremost!"

For myself, as I sprang upon the floe I lost my footing, and, falling headlong and remaining seated on the hither end of the floe amid a shower of spray, saw five of my seven comrades rush past, pushing and jostling, as they made for the shore. But presently the Morduine turned and halted beside me, with the intention of rendering Ossip assistance.

"Run, you young fools!" the latter exclaimed. "Come! Be off with you!"

Somehow in his face there was now a livid, uncertain air, while his eyes had lost their fire, and his mouth was curiously agape.

"No, mate. Do YOU get up," was my counter-adjuration.

"Unfortunately, I have hurt my leg," he replied with his head bent down. "In fact, I am not sure that I can get up."

However, we contrived to raise him and carry him ashore with an arm of his resting on each of our necks. Meanwhile he growled with chattering teeth:

"Aha, you river devils! Drown me if you can! But I've not given you a chance, the Lord be thanked! Hi, look out! The ice won't bear the three of us. Mind how you step, and choose places where the ice is bare of snow. There it's firmer. No, a better plan still would be to leave me where I am."

Next, with a frowning scrutiny of my face, he inquired:

"That notebook of our misdeeds – hasn't it had a wetting and got done for?"

That very moment, as we stepped from the stranded floe (in grounding, it had crushed and shattered a small boat), such part of it as lay in the water gave a loud crack, and, swaying to and fro, and emitting a gurgling sound, floated clear of the rest.

"Ah!" was the Morduine's quizzical comment. "YOU knew well enough what needed to be done."

Wet, and chilled to the bone, though relieved in spirit, we stepped ashore to find a crowd of townspeople in conversation with Boev and the old soldier. And as we deposited our charge under the lea of a pile of logs he shouted cheerfully:

"Mates, Makarei's notebook is done for, soaked through!" And since the notebook in question was weighing upon my breast like a brick, I pulled it out unseen, and hurled it far into the river with a plop like that of a frog.

As for the Diatlovs, they lost no time in setting out in search of vodka in the tavern on the hill, and slapped one another on the back as they ran, and could be heard shouting, "Hurrah, hurrah!"

Upon this, a tall old man with the beard of an apostle and the eyes of a brigand muttered:

"Infidels, why disturb peaceful folk like this? You ought to be thrashed!"

Whereupon Boev, who was changing his clothes, retorted:

"What do you mean by 'disturb'?"

"Besides," put in the old soldier, "even though we are Christians like yourself, we might as well have been drowned for all that you did to help us."

"What could we have done?"

Meanwhile Ossip had remained lying on the ground with one leg stretched out at full length, and tremulous hands fumbling at his greatcoat as under his breath he muttered:

"Holy Mother, how wet I am! My clothes, though I have only worn them a year, are ruined for ever!"

Moreover, he seemed now to have shrunken again in stature – to have become crumpled up like a man run over. Indeed, as he lay he seemed actually to be melting, so continuously was his bulk decreasing in size.

But suddenly he raised himself to a sitting posture, groaned, and exclaimed in high-pitched, wrathful accents:

"May the devil take you all! Be off with you to your washhouses and churches! Yes, be off, for it seems that, as God couldn't keep His holy festival without you, I've had to stand within an ace of death and to spoil my clothes-yes, all that you fellows should be got out of your fix!"

Nevertheless, the men merely continued taking off their boots, and wringing out their clothes, and conversing with sundry gasps and grunts with the bystanders. So presently Ossip resumed:

"What are you thinking of, you fools? The washhouse is the best place for you, for if the police get you, they'll soon find you a lodging, and no mistake!"

One of the townspeople put in officiously:

"Aye, aye. The police have been sent for."

And this led Boev to exclaim to Ossip:

"Why pretend like that?"

"Pretend? I?"

"Yes – you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it was you who egged us on to cross the river."

"You say that it was I?"

"I do."

"Indeed?"

"Aye," put in Budirin quietly, but incisively. And him the Morduine supported by saying in a sullen undertone:

"It was you, mate. By God it was. It would seem that you have forgotten."

"Yes, you started all this business," the old soldier corroborated, in dour, ponderous accents.

"Forgotten, indeed? HE?" was Boev's heated exclamation.

"How can you say such a thing? Well, let him not try to shift the responsibility on to others – that's all! WE'LL see, right enough, that he goes through with it!"

To this Ossip made no reply, but gazed frowningly at his dripping, half-clad men.

All at once, with a curious outburst of mingled smiles and tears (it would be hard to say which), he shrugged his shoulders, threw up his hands, and muttered:

"Yes, it IS true. If it please you, it was I that contrived the idea."

"Of COURSE it was!" the old soldier cried triumphantly.

Ossip turned his eyes again to where the river was seething like a bowl of porridge, and, letting his eyes fall with a frown, continued:

"In a moment of forgetfulness I did it. Yet how is it that we were not all drowned? Well, you wouldn't understand even if I were to tell you. No, by God, you wouldn't!.. Don't be angry with me, mates. Pardon me for the festival's sake, for I am feeling uneasy of mind. Yes, I it was that egged you on to cross the river, the old fool that I was!"

"Aha!" exclaimed Boev. "But, had I been drowned, what should you have said THEN?"

In fact, by this time Ossip seemed conscious to the full of the futility and the senselessness of what he had done: and in his state of sliminess, as he sat nodding his head, picking at the sand, looking at no one, and emitting a torrent of remorseful words, he reminded me strongly of a new-born calf.

And as I watched him I thought to myself:

"Where now is the leader of men who could draw his fellows in his train with so much care and skill and authority?"

And into my soul there trickled an uneasy sense of something lacking. Seating myself beside Ossip (for I desired still to retain a measure of my late impression of him), I said to him in an undertone:

"Soon you will be all right again."

With a sideways glance he muttered in reply, as he combed his beard:

"Well, you saw what happened just now. Always do things so happen."

While for the benefit of the men he added:

"That was a good jest of mine, eh?"

The summit of the hill which lay crouching, like a great beast, on the brink of the river was standing out clearly against the fast darkening sky; while a clump of trees thereon had grown black, and everywhere blue shadows of the spring eventide were coming into view, and looming between the housetops where the houses lay pressed like scabs against the hill's opaque surface, and peering

from the moist, red jaws of the ravine which, gaping towards the river, seemed as though it were stretching forth for a draught of water.

Also, by now the rustling and crunching of the ice on the similarly darkening river was beginning to assume a deeper note, and at times a floe would thrust one of its extremities into the bank as a pig thrusts its snout into the earth, and there remain motionless before once more beginning to sway, tearing itself free, and floating away down the river as another such floe glided into its place.

And ever more and more swiftly was the water rising, and washing away soil from the bank, and spreading a thick sediment over the dark blue surface of the river. And as it did so, there resounded in the air a strange noise as of chewing and champing, a noise as though some huge wild animal were masticating, and licking itself with its great long tongue.

And still there continued to come from the town the melancholy, distance-softened, sweet-toned song of the bells.

Presently, the brothers Diatlov appeared descending from the hill with bottles in their hands, and sporting like a couple of joyous puppies, while to intercept them there could be seen advancing along the bank of the river a grey-coated police sergeant and two black-coated constables.

"Oh Lord!" groaned Ossip as he rubbed his knee.

As for the townsfolk, they had no love for the police, so hastened to withdraw to a little distance, where they silently awaited the officers' approach. Before long the sergeant, a little, withered sort of a fellow with diminutive features and a sandy, stubby moustache, called out in gruff, stern, hoarse, laboured accents:

"So here you are, you rascals!"

Ossip prised himself up from the ground with his elbow, and said hurriedly:

"It was I that contrived the idea of the thing, your Excellency; but, pray let me off in honour of the festival."

"What do you say, you – ?" the sergeant began, but his bluster was lost amid the swift flow of Ossip's further conciliatory words.

"We are folk of this town," Ossip continued, "who tonight found ourselves stranded on the further bank, with nothing to buy bread with, even though the day after tomorrow will be Christ's day, the day when Christians like ourselves wish to clean themselves up a little, and to go to church. So I said to my mates, 'Be off with you, my good fellows, and may God send that no mishap befall you!' And for this presumptuousness of mine I have been punished already, for, as you can see, have as good as broken my leg."

"Yes," ejaculated the sergeant grimly. "But if you had been drowned, what then?"

Ossip sighed wearily.

"What then, do you say, your Excellency? Why, then, nothing, with your permission."

This led the officer to start railing at the culprit, while the crowd listened as silently and attentively as though he had been saying something worthy to be heard and heeded, rather than foully and cynically miscalling their mothers.

Lastly, our names having been noted, the police withdrew, while each of us drank a dram of vodka (and thereby gained a measure of warmth and comfort), and then began to make for our several homes. Ossip followed the police with derisive eyes; whereafter, he leapt to his feet with a nimble, adroit movement, and crossed himself with punctilious piety.

"That's all about it, thank God!" he exclaimed.

"What?" sniggered Boev, now both disillusioned and astonished. "Do you really mean to say that that leg of yours is better already? Or do you mean that it never was injured at all?"

"Ah! So you wish that it HAD been injured, eh?"

"The rascal of a Petrushka!" the other exclaimed.

"Now," commanded Ossip, "do all of you be off, mates." And with that he pulled his wet cap on to his head.

I accompanied him – walking a little behind the rest. As he limped along, he said in an undertone-said kindly – and as though he were communicating a secret known only to himself:

"Whatsoever one may do, and whithersoever one may turn, one will find that life cannot be lived without a measure of fraud and deceit. For that is what life IS, Makarei, the devil fly away with it!.. I suppose you're making for the hill? Well, I'll keep you company."

Darkness had fallen, but at a certain spot some red and yellow lamps, lamps the beams of which seemed to be saying, "Come up hither!" were shining through the obscurity.

Meanwhile, as we proceeded in the direction of the bells that were ringing on the hill, rivulets of water flowed with a murmur under our feet, and Ossip's kindly voice kept mingling with their sound.

"See," he continued, "how easily I befooled that sergeant! That is how things have to be done, Makarei – one has to keep folk from knowing one's business, yet to make them think that they are the chief persons concerned, and the persons whose wit has put the cap on the whole."

Yet as I listened to his speech, while supporting his steps, I could make little of it.

Nor did I care to make very much of it, for I was of a simple and easygoing nature. And though at the moment I could not have told whether I really liked Ossip, I would still have followed his lead in any direction – yes, even across the river again, though the ice had been giving way beneath me.

And as we proceeded, and the bells echoed and re-echoed, I thought to myself with a spasm of joy:

"Ah, many times may I thus walk to greet the spring!"

While Ossip said with a sigh:

"The human soul is a winged thing. Even in sleep it flies."

A winged thing? Yes, and a thing of wonder.

## GUBIN

The place where I first saw him was a tavern wherein, ensconced in the chimney-corner, and facing a table, he was exclaiming stutteringly, "Oh, I know the truth about you all! Yes, I know the truth about you!" while standing in a semicircle in front of him, and unconsciously rendering him more and more excited with their sarcastic interpolations, were some tradesmen of the superior sort – five in number. One of them remarked indifferently:

"How should you NOT know the truth about us, seeing that you do nothing but slander us?"

Shabby, in fact in rags, Gubin at that moment reminded me of a homeless dog which, having strayed into a strange street, has found itself held up by a band of dogs of superior strength, and, seized with nervousness, is sitting back on its haunches and sweeping the dust with its tail; and, with growls, and occasional barings of its fangs, and sundry barkings, attempting now to intimidate its adversaries, and now to conciliate them. Meanwhile, having perceived the stranger's helplessness and insignificance, the native pack is beginning to moderate its attitude, in the conviction that, though continued maintenance of dignity is imperative, it is not worthwhile to pick a quarrel so long as an occasional yelp be vented in the stranger's face.

"To whom are you of any use?" one of the tradesmen at length inquired.

"Not a man of us but may be of use."

"To whom, then?" ...

I had long since grown familiar with tavern disputes concerning verities, and not infrequently seen those disputes develop into open brawls; but never had I permitted myself to be drawn into their toils, or to be set wandering amid their tangles like a blind man negotiating a number of hillocks. Moreover, just before this encounter with Gubin, I had arrived at a dim surmise that when such differences were carried to the point of madness and bloodshed. Really, they constituted an expression of the unmeaning, hopeless, melancholy life that is lived in the wilder and more remote districts of Russia – of the life that is lived on swampy banks of dingy rivers, and in our smaller and more God-forgotten towns. For it would seem that in such places men have nothing to look for, nor any knowledge of how to look for anything; wherefore, they brawl and shout in vain attempts to dissipate despondency...

I myself was sitting near Gubin, but on the other side of the table. Yet, this was not because his outbursts and the tradesmen's retorts thereto were a pleasure to listen to, since to me both the one and the other seemed about as futile as beating the air.

"To whom are YOU of use?"

"To himself every man can be useful."

"But what good can one do oneself?" ...

The windows of the tavern were open, while in the pendent, undulating cloud of blue smoke that the flames of the lamps emitted, those lamps looked like so many yellow pitchers floating amid the waters of a stagnant pond. Out of doors there was brooding the quiet of an August night, and not a rustle, not a whisper was there to be heard. Hence, as numbed with melancholy, I gazed at the inky heavens and limpid stars I thought to myself:

"Surely, never were the sky and the stars meant to look down upon a life like this, a life like this?"

Suddenly someone said with the subdued assurance of a person reading aloud from a written document:

"Unless the peasants of Kubarovo keep a watch upon their timber lands, the sun will fire them tomorrow, and then the Birkins' forest also will catch alight."

For a moment the dispute died down. Then, as it were cleaving the silence, a voice said stutteringly:

"Who cares about the significance of the word 'truth'?"

And the words – heavy, jumbled, and clumsy – filled me with despondent reflections. Then again the voices rose – this time in louder and more venomous accents, and with their din recalled to me, by some accident, the foolish lines:

The gods did give men water  
To wash in, and to drink;  
Yet man has made it but a pool  
In which his woes to sink.

Presently I moved outside and, seating myself on the steps of the veranda, fell to contemplating the dull, blurred windows of the Archpriest's house on the other side of the square, and to watching how black shadows kept flitting to and fro behind their panes as the faint, lugubrious notes of a guitar made themselves heard. And a high-pitched, irritable voice kept repeating at intervals: "Allow me. Pray, permit me to speak," and being answered by a voice which intermittently shot into the silence, as into a bottomless sack, the words: "No, do you wait a moment, do you wait a moment."

Surrounded by the darkness, the houses looked stunted like gravestones, with a line of black trees above their roofs that loomed shadowy and cloud-like. Only in the furthest corner of the expanse was the light of a solitary street lamp bearing a resemblance to the disk of a stationary, resplendent dandelion.

Over everything was melancholy. Far from inviting was the general outlook. So much was this the case that, had, at that moment, anyone stolen upon me from behind the bushes and dealt me a sudden blow on the head, I should merely have sunk to earth without attempting to see who my assailant had been.

Often, in those days, was I in this mood, for it clave to me as faithfully as a dog – never did it wholly leave me.

"It was for men like THOSE that this fair earth of ours was bestowed upon us!" I thought to myself.

Suddenly, with a clatter, someone ran out of the door of the tavern, slid down the steps, fell headlong at their foot, quickly regained his equilibrium, and disappeared in the darkness after exclaiming in a threatening voice:

"Oh, I'LL pay you out! I'LL skin you, you damned...!"

Whereafter two figures that also appeared in the doorway said as they stood talking to one another:

"You heard him threaten to fire the place, did you not?"

"Yes, I did. But why should he want to fire it?"

"Because he is a dangerous rascal."

Presently, slinging my wallet upon my back, I pursued my onward way along a street that was fenced on either side with a tall palisade. As I proceeded, long grasses kept catching at my feet and rustling drily. And so warm was the night as to render the payment of a lodging fee superfluous; and the more so since in the neighbourhood of the cemetery, where an advanced guard of young pines had pushed forward to the cemetery wall and littered the sandy ground, with a carpet of red, dry cones, there were sleeping-places prepared in advance.

Suddenly from the darkness there emerged, to recoil again, a man's tall figure.

"Who is that? Who is it?" asked the hoarse, nervous voice of Gubin in dissipation of the deathlike stillness.

Which said, he and I fell into step with one another. As we proceeded he inquired whence I had come, and why I was still abroad. Whereafter he extended to me, as to an old acquaintance, the invitation:

"Will you come and sleep at my place? My house is near here, and as for work, I will find you a job tomorrow. In fact, as it happens, I am needing a man to help me clean out a well at the Birkins' place. Will the job suit you? Very well, then. Always I like to settle things overnight, as it is at night that I can best see through people."

The "house" turned out to be nothing more than an old one-eyed, hunchbacked washhouse or shanty which, bulging of wall, stood wedged against the clayey slope of a ravine as though it would fain bury itself amid the boughs of the neighbouring arbutus trees and elders.

Without striking a light, Gubin flung himself upon some mouldy hay that littered a threshold as narrow as the threshold of a dog-kennel, and said to me with an air of authority as he did so:

"I will sleep with my head towards the door, for the atmosphere here is a trifle confined."

And, true enough, the place reeked of elderberries, soap, burnt stuff, and decayed leaves. I could not conceive why I had come to such a spot.

The twisted branches of the neighbouring trees hung motionless athwart the sky, and concealed from view the golden dust of the Milky Way, while across the Oka an owl kept screeching, and the strange, arresting remarks of my companion pelted me like showers of peas.

"Do not be surprised that I should live in a remote ravine," he said. "I, whose hand is against every man, can at least feel lord of what I survey here."

Too dark was it for me to see my host's face, but my memory recalled his bald cranium, and the yellow light of the lamps falling upon a nose as long as a woodpecker's beak, a pair of grey and stubbly cheeks, a pair of thin lips covered by a bristling moustache, a mouth sharp-cut as with a knife, and full of black, evil-looking stumps, a pair of pointed, sensitive, mouse-like ears, and a clean-shaven chin. The last feature in no way consorted with his visage, or with his whole appearance; but at least it rendered him worthy of remark, and enabled one to realise that one had to deal with neither a peasant nor a soldier nor a tradesman, but with a man peculiar to himself. Also, his frame was lanky, with long arms and legs, and pointed knees and elbows. In fact, so like a piece of string was his body that to twist it round and round, or even to tie it into a knot, would, seemingly, have been easy enough.

For awhile I found his speech difficult to follow; wherefore, silently I gazed at the sky, where the stars appeared to be playing at follow-my-leader.

"Are you asleep?" at length he inquired.

"No, I am not. Why do you shave your beard?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because, if you will pardon me, I think your face would look better bearded."

With a short laugh he exclaimed:

"Bearded? Ah, sloven! Bearded, indeed!"

To which he added more gravely:

"Both Peter the Great and Nicholas I were wiser than you, for they ordained that whosoever should be bearded should have his nose slit, and be fined a hundred roubles. Did you ever hear of that?"

"No."

"And from the same source, from the beard, arose also the Great Schism."

His manner of speaking was too rapid to be articulate, and, in leaving his mouth, his words caused his lips to bare stumps and gums amid which they lost their way, became disintegrated, and issued, as it were, in an incomplete state.

"Everyone," he continued, "knows that life is lived more easily with a beard than without one, since with a beard lies are more easily told – they can be told, and then hidden in the masses of hair. Hence we ought to go through life with our faces naked, since such faces render untruthfulness more difficult, and prevent their owners from prevaricating without the fact becoming plain to all."

"But what about women?"

"What about women? Well, women can always lie to their husbands successfully, but not to all the town, to all the world, to folk in general. Moreover, since a woman's real business in life is the same as that of the hen, to rear young, what can it matter if she DOES cackle a few falsehoods, provided that she be neither a priest nor a mayor nor a tchinovnik, and does not possess any authority, and cannot establish laws? For the really important point is that the law itself should not lie, but ever uphold truth pure and simple. Long has the prevalent illegality disgusted me."

The door of the shanty was standing open, and amid the outer darkness, as in a church, the trees looked like pillars, and the white stems of the birches like silver candelabra tipped with a thousand lights, or dimly-seen choristers with faces showing pale above sacramental vestments of black. All my soul was full of a sort of painful restlessness. It was a feeling as though I should live to rise and go forth into the darkness, and offer battle to the terrors of the night; yet ever, as my companion's torrential speech caught and held my attention, it detained me where I was.

"My father was a man of no little originality and character," he went on. "Wherefore, none of the townsfolk liked him. By the age of twenty he had risen to be an alderman, yet never to the end could get the better of folk's stubbornness and stupidity, even though he made it his custom to treat all and sundry to food and drink, and to reason with them. No, not even at the last did he attain his due. People feared him because he revolutionised everything, revolutionised it down to the very roots; the truth being that he had grasped the one essential fact that law and order must be driven, like nails, into the people's very vitals."

Mice squeaked under the floor, and on the further side of the Oka an owl screeched, while amid the pitch-black heavens I could see a number of blotches intermittently lightening to an elusive red and blurring the faint glitter of the stars.

"It was one o'clock in the morning when my father died," Gubin continued. "And upon myself, who was seventeen and had just finished my course at the municipal school of Riazan, there devolved, naturally enough, all the enmity that my father had incurred during his lifetime. 'He is just like his sire,' folk said. Also, I was alone, absolutely alone, in the world, since my mother had lost her reason two years before my father's death, and passed away in a frenzy. However, I had an uncle, a retired unter-officier who was both a sluggard, a tippler, and a hero (a hero because he had had his eyes shot out at Plevna, and his left arm injured in a manner which had induced paralysis, and his breast adorned with the military cross and a set of medals). And sometimes, this uncle of mine would rally me on my learning. For instance, 'Scholar,' he would say, 'what does "tiversia" mean?' 'No such word exists,' would be my reply, and thereupon he would seize me by the hair, for he was rather an awkward person to deal with. Another factor as concerned making me ashamed of my scholarship was the ignorance of the townspeople in general, and in the end I became the common butt, a sort of 'holy idiot.'"

So greatly did these recollections move Gubin that he rose and transferred his position to the door of the hut, where, a dark blur against the square of blue, he lit a gurgling pipe, and puffed thereat until his long, conical nose glowed. Presently the surging stream of words began again:

"At twenty I married an orphan, and when she fell ill and died childless I found myself alone once more, and without an adviser or a friend. However, still I continued both to live and to look about me. And in time, I perceived that life is not lived wholly as it should be."

"What in life is 'not lived wholly as it should be'?"

"Everything in life. For life is mere folly, mere fatuous nonsense. The truth is that our dogs do not bark always at the right moment. For instance, when I said to folk, 'How would it be if we were to open a technical school for girls?' They merely laughed and replied, 'Trade workers are hopeless drunkards. Already have we enough of them. Besides, hitherto women have contrived to get on WITHOUT education.' And when next I conceived a scheme for instituting a match factory, it befell that the factory was burnt down during its first year of existence, and I found myself once more at a loose end. Next a certain woman got hold of me, and I flitted about her like a martin around a belfry, and so lost my head as to live life as though I were not on earth at all – for three years I did

not know even what I was doing, and only when I recovered my senses did I perceive myself to be a pauper, and my all, every single thing that I had possessed, to have passed into HER white hands. Yes, at twenty-eight I found myself a beggar. Yet I have never wholly regretted the fact, for certainly for a time I lived life as few men ever live it. 'Take my all – take it!' I used to say to her. And, truly enough, I should never have done much good with my father's fortune, whereas she – well, so it befell. Somehow I think that in those days my opinions must have been different from now – now that I have lost everything... Yet the woman used to say, 'You have NOT lost everything,' and she had wit enough to fit out a whole townful of people."

"This woman – who was she?"

"The wife of a merchant. Whenever she unrobed and said, 'Come! What is this body of mine worth?' I used to make reply, 'A price that is beyond compute'... So within three years everything that I possessed vanished like smoke. Sometimes, of course, folk laughed at and jibed at me; nor did I ever refute them. But now that I have come to have a better understanding of life's affairs, I see that life is not wholly lived as it should be. For that matter, too, I do not hold my tongue on the subject, for that is not my way – still left to me I have a tongue and my soul. The same reason accounts for the fact that no one likes me, and that by everyone I am looked upon as a fool."

"How, in your opinion, ought life to be lived?"

Without answering me at once, Gubin sucked at his pipe until his nose made a glowing red blur in the darkness. Then he muttered slowly:

"How life ought to be lived no one could say exactly. And this though I have given much thought to the subject, and still am doing so."

I found it no difficult matter to form a mental picture of the desolate existence which this man must be leading – this man whom all his fellows both derided and shunned. For at that time I too was bidding fair to fail in life, and had my heart in the grip of ceaseless despondency.

The truth is that of futile people Russia is over-full. Many such I myself have known, and always they have attracted me as strongly and mysteriously as a magnet. Always they have struck me more favourably than the provincial-minded majority who live for food and work alone, and put away from them all that could conceivably render their bread-winning difficult, or prevent them from snatching bread out of the hands of their weaker neighbours. For most such folk are gloomy and self-contained, with hearts that have turned to wood, and an outlook that ever reverts to the past; unless, indeed, they be folk of spurious good nature, an addition to talkativeness, and an apparent bonhomie which veils a frigid, grey interior, and conveys an impression of cruelty and greed of all that life contains.

Always, in the end, I have detected in such folk something wintry, something that makes them seem, as it were, to be spending spring and summer in expectation solely of the winter season, with its long nights, and its cold of an austerity which forces one for ever to be consuming food.

Yet seldom among this distasteful and wearisome crowd of wintry folk is there to be encountered a man who has altogether proved a failure. But if he has done so, he will be found to be a man whose nature is of a more thoughtful, a more truly existent, a more clear-sighted cast than that of his fellows – a man who at least can look beyond the boundaries of the trite and commonplace, and whose mentality has a greater capacity for attaining spiritual fulfilment, and is more desirous of doing so, than the mentality of his compeers. That is to say, in such a man one can always detect a striving for space, as a man who, loving light, carries light in himself.

Unfortunately, all too often is that light only the fugitive phosphorescence of putrefaction; wherefore as one contemplates him one soon begins to realise with bitterness and vexation and disappointment that he is but a sluggard, but a braggart, but one who is petty and weak and blinded with conceit and distorted with envy, but one between whose word and whose deed there gapes a disparity even wider and deeper than the disparity which divides the word from the deed of the man of winter, of the man who, though he be as tardy as a snail, at least is making some way in the world,

in contradistinction from the failure who revolves ever in a single spot, like some barren old maid before the reflection in her looking-glass.

Hence, as I listened to Gubin, there recurred to me more than one instance of his type.

"Yes, I have succeeded in observing life throughout," he muttered drowsily as his head sank slowly upon his breast.

And sleep overtook myself with similar suddenness. Apparently that slumber was of a few minutes' duration only, yet what aroused me was Gubin pulling at my leg.

"Get up now," he said. "It is time that we were off."

And as his bluish-grey eyes peered into my face, somehow I derived from their mournful expression a sense of intellectuality. Beneath the hair on his hollow cheeks were reddish veins, while similar veins, bluish in tint, covered with a network his temples, and his bare arms had the appearance of being made of tanned leather.

Dawn had not yet broken when we rose and proceeded through the slumbering streets beneath a sky that was of a dull yellow, and amid an atmosphere that was full of the smell of burning.

"Five days now has the forest been on fire," observed Gubin. "Yet the fools cannot succeed in putting it out."

Presently the establishment of the merchants Birkin lay before us, an establishment of curious aspect, since it constituted, rather, a conglomeration of appendages to a main building of ground floor and attics, with four windows facing on to the street, and a series of underpropping annexes. That series extended to the wing, and was solid and permanent, and bade fair to overflow into the courtyard, and through the entrance-gates, and across the street, and to the very kitchen-garden and flower-garden themselves. Also, it seemed to have been stolen piecemeal from somewhere, and at different periods, and from different localities, and tacked at haphazard on to the walls of the parent erection. Moreover, all the windows of the latter were small, and in their green panes, as they confronted the world, there was a timid and suspicious air, while, in particular, the three windows which faced upon the courtyard had iron bars to them. Lastly, there were posted, sentinel-like on the entrance-steps, two water-butts as a precaution against fire.

"What think you of the place?" Gubin muttered as he peered into the well. "Isn't it a barbarous hole? The right thing would be to pull it down wholesale, and then rebuild it on larger and less restricted lines. Yet these fools merely go tacking new additions on to the old."

For awhile his lips moved as in an incantation. Then he frowned, glanced shrewdly at the structures in question, and continued softly:

"I may say in passing that the place is MINE."

"YOURS?"

"Yes, mine. At all events, so it used to be."

And he pulled a grimace as though he had got the toothache before adding with an air of command:

"Come! I will pump out the water, and YOU shall carry it to the entrance-steps and fill the water-butts. Here is a pail, and here a ladder."

Whereafter, with a considerable display of strength, he set about his portion of the task, whilst I myself took pail in hand and advanced towards the steps to find that the water-butts were so rotten that, instead of retaining the water, they let it leak out into the courtyard. Gubin said with an oath:

"Fine masters these – masters who grudge one a groat, and squander a rouble! What if a fire WERE to break out? Oh, the blockheads!"

Presently, the proprietors in person issued into the courtyard – the stout, bald Peter Birkin, a man whose face was flushed even to the whites of his shifty eyes, and, close behind him, eke his shadow, Jonah Birkin – a person of sandy, sullen mien, and overhanging brows, and dull, heavy eyes.

"Good day, dear sir," said Peter Birkin thinly, as with a puffy hand he raised from his head a cloth cap, while Jonah nodded. And then, with a sidelong glance at myself, asked in a deep bass voice:

"Who is this young man?"

Large and important like peacocks, the pair then shuffled across the wet yard, and in so doing, went to much trouble to avoid soiling their polished shoes. Next Peter said to his brother:

"Have you noticed that the water-butts are rotted? Oh, that fine Yakinika! He ought long ago to have been dismissed."

"Who is that young man over there?" Jonah repeated with an air of asperity.

"The son of his father and mother," Gubin replied quietly, and without so much as a glance at the brothers.

"Well, come along," snuffled Peter with a drawling of his vowels. "It is high time that we were moving. It doesn't matter who the young man may be."

And with that they slip-slopped across to the entrance gates, while Gubin gazed after them with knitted brows, and as the brothers were disappearing through the wicket said carelessly:

"The old sheep! They live solely by the wits of their stepmother, and if it were not for her, they would long ago have come to grief. Yes, she is a woman beyond words clever. Once upon a time there were three brothers – Peter, Alexis, and Jonah; but, unfortunately, Alexis got killed in a brawl. A fine, tall fellow HE was, whereas these two are a pair of gluttons, like everyone else in this town. Not for nothing do three loaves figure on the municipal arms! Now, to work again! Or shall we take a rest?"

Here there stepped on to the veranda a tall, well-grown young woman in an open pink bodice and a blue skirt who, shading blue eyes with her hand, scanned the courtyard and the steps, and said with some diffidence:

"Good day, Yakov Vasilitch."

With a good-humoured glance in response, and his mouth open, Gubin waved a hand in greeting:

"Good day to YOU, Nadezhda Ivanovna," he replied. "How are you this morning?"

Somehow this made her blush, and cross her arms upon her ample bosom, while her kindly, rounded, eminently Russian face evinced the ghost of a shy smile. At the same time, it was a face wherein not a single feature was of a kind to remain fixed in the memory, a face as vacant as though nature had forgotten to stamp thereon a single wish. Hence, even when the woman smiled there seemed to remain a doubt whether the smile had really materialised.

"How is Natalia Vasilievna?" continued Gubin.

"Much as usual," the woman answered softly.

Whereafter hesitantly, and with downcast eyes, she essayed to cross the courtyard. As she passed me I caught a whiff of raspberries and currants.

Disappearing into the grey mist through a small door with iron staples, she soon reissued thence with a hencoop, and, seating herself on the steps of the doorway, and setting the coop on her knees, took between her two large palms some fluttering, chirping, downy, golden chicks, and raised them to her ruddy lips and cheeks with a murmur of:

"Oh my little darlings! Oh my little darlings!"

And in her voice, somehow, there was a note as of intoxication, of abandonment. Meanwhile dull, reddish sunbeams were beginning to peer through the fence, and to warm the long, pointed staples with which it was fastened together. While in a stream of water that was dripping from the eaves, and trickling over the floor of the court, and around the woman's feet, a single beam was bathing and quivering as though it would fain effect an advance to the woman's lap and the hencoop, and, with the soft, downy chicks, enjoy the caresses of the woman's bare white arms.

"Ah, little things!" again she murmured. "Ah, little children of mine!"

Upon that Gubin suddenly desisted from his task of hauling up the bucket, and, as he steadied the rope with his arms raised above his head, said quickly:

"Nadezhda Ivanovna, you ought indeed to have had some children – six at the least!"

Yet no reply came, nor did the woman even look at him.

The rays of the sun were now spreading, smokelike and greyish-yellow, over the silver river. Above the river's calm bed a muslin texture of mist was coiling. Against the nebulous heavens the blue of the forest was rearing itself amid the fragrant, pungent fumes from the burning timber.

Yet still asleep amid its sheltering half-circle of forest was the quiet little town of Miamlin, while behind it, and encompassing it as with a pair of dark wings, the forest in question looked as though it were ruffling its feathers in preparation for further flight beyond the point where, the peaceful Oka reached, the trees stood darkening, overshadowing the water's clear depths, and looking at themselves therein.

Yet, though the hour was so early, everything seemed to have about it an air of sadness, a mien as though the day lacked promise, as though its face were veiled and mournful, as though, not yet come to birth, it nevertheless were feeling weary in advance.

Seating myself by Gubin on some trampled straw in the hut ordinarily used by the watchman of the Birkins' extensive orchard, I found that, owing to the orchard being set on a hillside, I could see over the tops of the apple and pear and fig trees, where their tops hung bespangled with dew as with quicksilver, and view the whole town and its multicoloured churches, yellow, newly-painted prison, and yellow-painted bank.

And while in the town's lurid, four-square buildings I could trace a certain resemblance to the aces of clubs stamped upon convicts' backs, in the grey strips of the streets I could trace a certain resemblance to a number of rents in an old, ragged, faded, dusty coat. Indeed, that morning all comparisons seemed to take on a tinge of melancholy; the reason being that throughout the previous evening there had been moaning in my soul a mournful dirge on the future life.

With nothing, however, were the churches of the town of which I am speaking exactly comparable, for many of them had attained a degree of beauty the contemplation of which caused the town to assume throughout – a different, a more pleasing and seductive, aspect. Thought I to myself: "Would that men had fashioned all other buildings in the town as the churches have been fashioned!"

One of the latter, an old, squat edifice the blank windows of which were deeply sunken in the stuccoed walls, was known as the "Prince's Church," for the reason that it enshrined the remains of a local Prince and his wife, persons of whom it stood recorded that "they did pass all their lives in kindly, unchanging love."...

The following night Gubin and I chanced to see Peter Birkin's tall, pale, timid young wife traverse the garden on her way to a tryst in the washhouse with her lover, the precentor of the Prince's Church. And as clad in a simple gown, and barefooted, and having her ample shoulders swathed in an old, gold jacket or shawl of some sort, she crossed the orchard by a path running between two lines of apple trees; she walked with the unhasting gait of a cat which is crossing a yard after a shower of rain, and from time to time, whenever a puddle is encountered, lifts and shakes fastidiously one of its soft paws. Probably, in the woman's case, this came of the fact that things kept pricking and tickling her soles as she proceeded. Also, her knees, I could see, were trembling, and her step had in it a certain hesitancy, a certain lack of assurance.

Meanwhile, bending over the garden from the warm night sky, the moon's kindly visage, though on the wane, was shining brightly; and when the woman emerged from the shadow of the trees I could discern the dark patches of her eyes, her rounded, half-parted lips, and the thick plait of hair which lay across her bosom. Also, in the moonlight her bodice had assumed a bluish tinge, so that she looked almost phantasmal; and when soundlessly, moving as though on air, she stepped back into the shadow of the trees, that shadow seemed to lighten.

All this happened at midnight, or thereabouts, but neither of us was yet asleep, owing to the fact that Gubin had been telling me some interesting stories concerning the town and its families and inhabitants. However, as soon as he descried the woman looming like a ghost, he leapt to his feet in comical terror, then subsided on to the straw again, contracted his body as though he were in convulsions, and hurriedly made the sign of the cross.

"Oh Jesus our Lord!" he gasped. "Tell me what that is, tell me what that is!"

"Keep quiet, you," I urged.

Instead, lurching in my direction, he nudged me with his arm,

"Is it Nadezhda, think you?" he whispered.

"It is."

"Phew! The scene seems like a dream. Just in the same way, and in the very same place, did her mother-in-law, Petrushka's stepmother, use to come and walk. Yes, it was just like this."

Then, rolling over, face downwards, he broke into subdued, malicious chuckles; whereafter, seizing my hand and sawing it up and down, he whispered amid his exultant pants:

"I expect Petrushka is asleep, for probably he has taken too much liquor at the Bassanov's smotrini. [A festival at which a fiance pays his first visit to the house of the parents of his betrothed.] Aye, he will be asleep. And as for Jonah, HE will have gone to Vaska Klochi. So tonight, until morning, Nadezhda will be able to kick up her heels to her heart's content."

I too had begun to surmise that the woman was come thither for purposes of her own. Yet the scene was almost dreamlike in its beauty. It thrilled me to the soul to watch how the woman's blue eyes gazed about her – gazed as though she were ardently, caressingly whispering to all living creatures, asleep or awake:

"Oh my darlings! Oh my darlings!"

Beside me the uncouth, broken-down Gubin went on in hoarse accents:

"You must know that she is Petrushka's THIRD wife, a woman whom he took to himself from the family of a merchant of Murom. Yet the town has it that not only Petrushka, but also Jonah, makes use of her – that she acts as wife to both brothers, and therefore lacks children. Also has it been said of her that one Trinity Sunday she was seen by a party of women to misconduct herself in this garden with a police sergeant, and then to sit on his lap and weep. Yet this last I do not wholly believe, for the sergeant in question is a veteran scarcely able to put one foot before the other. Also, Jonah, though a brute, lives in abject fear of his stepmother."

Here a worm-eaten apple fell to the ground, and the woman paused; whereafter, with head a little raised, she resumed her way with greater speed.

As for Gubin, he continued, unchecked, though with a trifle less animosity, rather as though he were reading aloud a manuscript which he found wearisome:

"See how a man like Peter Birkin may pride himself upon his wealth, and receive honour during his lifetime, yet all the while have the devil grinning over his shoulder!"

Then he, Gubin, kept silent awhile, and merely breathed heavily, and twisted his body about. But suddenly, he resumed in a strange whisper:

"Fifteen years ago – no, surely it was longer ago than that? – Madame Nadkin, Nadezhda's mother-in-law, made it her practice to come to this spot to meet her lover. And a fine gallant HE was!"

Somehow, as I watched the woman creeping along, and looking as though she were intending to commit a theft, or as though she fancied that at any moment she might see the plump brothers Birkin issue from the courtyard into the garden and come shuffling ponderously over the darkened ground, with ropes and cudgels grasped in coarse, red hands which knew no pity; somehow, as I watched her, I felt saddened, and paid little heed to Gubin's whispered remarks, so intently were my eyes fixed upon the granary wall as, after gliding along it awhile, the woman bent her head and disappeared through the dark blue of the washhouse door. As for Gubin, he went to sleep with a last drowsy remark of:

"Life is all falsity. Husbands, wives, fathers, children – all of them practise deceit."

In the east, portions of the sky were turning to light purple, and other portions to a darker hue, while from time to time I could see, looming black against those portions, coils of smoke the density of which kept being stabbed with fiery spikes of flame, so that the vague, towering forest looked like a hill on the top of which a fiery dragon was crawling about, and writhing, and intermittently raising tremulous, scarlet wings, and as often relapsing into, becoming submerged in, the bank of

vapour. And, in contemplating the spectacle, I seemed actually to be able to hear the cruel, hissing din of combat between red and black, and to see pale, frightened rabbits scudding from underneath the roots of trees amid showers of sparks, and panting, half-suffocated birds fluttering wildly amid the branches as further and further afield, and more and more triumphantly, the scarlet dragon unfurled its wings, and consumed the darkness, and devoured the rain-soaked timber.

Presently from the dark, blurred doorway in the wall of the washhouse there emerged a dark figure which went flitting away among the trees, while after it someone called in a sharp, incisive whisper:

"Do not forget. You MUST come."

"Oh, I shall be only too glad!"

"Very well. In the morning the lame woman shall call upon you. Do you hear?"

And as the woman disappeared from view the other person sauntered across the garden, and scaled the fence with a clatter.

That night I could not sleep, but, until dawn, lay watching the burning forest as gradually the weary moon declined, and the lamp of Venus, cold and green as an emerald, came into view over the crosses on the Prince's Church. Indeed was the latter a fitting place for Venus to illumine if really it had been the case that the Prince and Princess had "passed their lives in kindly, unchanging love"!

Gradually, the dew cleared the trees of the night darkness, and caused the damp, grey foliage to smile once more with aniseed and red raspberry, and to sparkle with the gold of their mildew. Also, there came hovering about us goldfinches with their little red-hooded crests, and fussy tomtits in their cravats of yellow, while a nimble, dark, blue woodpecker scaled the stem of an apple tree. And everywhere, yellow leaves fluttered to earth, and, in doing so, so closely resembled birds as to make it not always easy to distinguish whether a leaf or a tomtit had glimmered for a moment in the air.

Gubin awoke, sighed, and with his gnarled knuckles gave his puffy eyes a rub. Then he raised himself upon all-fours, and, crawling, much dishevelled with sleep, out of the watchman's hut, snuffed the air (a process in which his movements approximated comically to those of a keen-nosed watchdog). Finally he rose to his feet, and, in the act, shook one of the trees so violently as to cause a bough to shed its burden of ripe fruit, and disperse the apples hither and thither over the dry surface of the ground, or cause them to bury themselves among the long grass. Three of the juiciest apples he duly recovered, and, after examination of their exterior, probed with his teeth, while kicking away from him as many of the remainder as he could descry.

"Why spoil those apples?" I queried

"Oh, so you are NOT asleep?" he countered with a nod of his melon-shaped cranium. "As a matter of fact, a few apples won't be missed, for there are too many of them about. My own father it was that planted the trees which have grown them."

Then, turning upon me a keen, good-humoured eye, and chuckling, he added:

"What about that Nadezhda? Ah, she is a clever woman indeed! Yet I have a surprise in store for her and her lover."

"Why should you have?"

"Because I desire to benefit mankind at large" (this was said didactically, and with a frown). "For, no matter where I detect evil or underhandedness, it is my duty – I feel it to be my duty – to expose that evil, and to lay it bare. There exist people who need to be taught a lesson, and to whom I long to cry: 'Sinners that you are, do you lead more righteous lives!'"

From behind some clouds the sun was rising with a disk as murky and mournful as the face of an ailing child. It was as though he were feeling conscious that he had done amiss in so long delaying to shed light upon the world, in so long dallying on his bed of soft clouds amid the smoke of the forest fire. But gradually the cheering beams suffused the garden throughout, and evoked from the ripening fruit an intoxicating wave of scent in which there could be distinguished also the bracing breath of autumn.

Simultaneously there rose into the sky, in the wake of the sun, a dense stratum of cloud which, blue and snow-white in colour, lay with its soft hummocks reflected in the calm Oka, and so wrought therein a secondary firmament as profound and impalpable as its original.

"Now then, Makar!" was Gubin's command, and once more I posted myself at the bottom of the well. About three sazheni in depth, and lined with cold, damp mud to above the level of my middle, the orifice was charged with a stifling odour both of rotten wood and of something more intolerable still. Also, whenever I had filled the pail with mud, and then emptied it into the bucket and shouted "Right away!" the bucket would start swinging against my person and bumping it, as unwillingly it went aloft, and thereafter discharge upon my head and shoulders clots of filth and drippings of water – meanwhile screening, with its circular bottom, the glowing sun and now scarce visible stars. In passing, the spectacle of those stars' waning both pained and cheered me, for it meant that for a companion in the firmament they now had the sun. Hence it was until my neck felt almost fractured, and my spine and the nape of my neck were aching as though clamped in a cast of plaster of paris, that I kept my eyes turned aloft. Yes, anything to gain a sight of the stars! From them I could not remove my vision, for they seemed to exhibit the heavens in a new guise, and to convey to me the joyful tidings that in the sky there was present also the sun.

Yet though, meanwhile, I tried to ponder on something great, I never failed to find myself cherishing the absurd, obstinate apprehension that soon the Birkins would leave their beds, enter the courtyard, and have Nadezhda betrayed to them by Gubin.

And throughout there kept descending to me from above the latter's inarticulate, as it were damp-sodden, observations.

"Another rat!" I heard him exclaim. "To think that those two fellows, men of money, should neglect for two whole years to clean out their well! Why, what can the brutes have been drinking meanwhile? Look out below, you!"

And once more, with a creaking of the pulley, the bucket would descend – bumping and thudding against the lining of the well as it did so, and bespattering afresh my head and shoulders with its filth. Rightly speaking, the Birkins ought to have cleared out the well themselves!

"Let us exchange places," I cried at length.

"What is wrong?" inquired Gubin in response

"Down here it is cold – I can't stand it any longer."

"Gee up!" exclaimed Gubin to the old horse which supplied the leverage power for the bucket; whereupon I seated myself upon the edge of the receptacle and went aloft, where everything was looking so bright and warm as to bear a new and unwontedly pleasing appearance.

So now it was Gubin's turn to stand at the bottom of the well. And soon, in addition to the odour of decay, and a subdued sound of splashing, and the rumblings and bumpings of the iron bucket against its chain, there began to come up from the damp, black cavity a perfect stream of curses.

"The infernal skinflints!" I heard my companion exclaim.

"Hullo, here is something! A dog or a baby, eh? The damned old barbarians!"

And the bucket ascended with, among its contents, a sodden and most ancient hat. With the passage of time Gubin's temper grew worse and worse.

"If I SHOULD find a baby here," next he exclaimed, "I shall report the matter to the police, and get those blessed old brothers into trouble."

Each movement of the leathern-hided, wall-eyed steed which did our bidding was accompanied by a swishing of a sandy tail which had for its object the brushing away of autumn's harbingers, the bluebottles. Almost with the tranquil gait of a religious did the animal accomplish its periodical journeys from the wall to the entrance gates and back again; after which it always heaved a profound sigh, and stood with its bony crest lowered.

Presently, from a corner of the yard that lay screened behind some rank, pale, withered, trampled herbage a door screeched. Into the yard there issued Nadezhda Birkin, carrying a bunch of

keys, and followed by a lady who, elderly and rotund of figure, had a few dark hairs growing on her full and rather haughty upper lip. As the two walked towards the cellar (Nadezhda being clad only in an under-petticoat, with a chemise half-covering her shoulders, and slippers thrust on to bare feet), I perceived from the languor of the younger woman's gait that she was feeling weary indeed.

"Why do you look at us like that?" her senior inquired of me as she drew level. And as she did so the eyes that peered at me from above the full and, somehow, displaced-looking cheeks bid in them a dim, misty, half-blind expression.

"That must be Peter Birkin's mother-in-law," was my unspoken reflection.

At the door of the cellar Nadezhda handed the keys to her companion, and with a slow step which set her ample bosom swaying, and increased the disarray of the bodice on her round, but broad, shoulders, approached myself, and said quietly:

"Please open the gutter-slucice and let out the water into the street, or the yard will soon be flooded. Oh, the smell of it! What is that thing there? A rat? Oh batinshka, what a horrible mess!"

Her face had about it a drawn look, and under her eyes there were a pair of dark patches, and in their depths the dry glitter of a person who has spent a night of waking. True, it was a face still fresh of hue; yet beads of sweat were standing on the forehead, and her shoulders looked grey and heavy – as grey and heavy as unleavened bread which the fire has coated with a thin crust, yet failed to bake throughout.

"Please, also, open the wicket," she continued. "And, in case a lame old beggar-woman should call, come and tell me. I am the Nadezhda Ivanovna for whom she will inquire. Do you understand?"

From the well, at this point, there issued the words:

"Who is that speaking?"

"It is the mistress," I replied.

"What? Nadezhda? With her I have a bone to pick."

"What did he say?" the woman asked tensely as she raised her dark, thinly pencilled brows, and made as though to go and lean over the well. Independently of my own volition I forestalled what Gubin might next have been going to say by remarking:

"I must tell you that last night he saw you walking in the garden here."

"Indeed?" she ejaculated, and drew herself to her full height. Yet in doing so she blushed to her shoulders, and, clapping plump hands to her bosom, and opening dark eyes to their fullest, said in a hasty and confused whisper as, again paling and shrinking in stature, she subsided like a piece of pastry that is turning heavy:

"Good Lord! WHAT did he see?.. If the lame woman should call, you must not admit her. No, tell her that she will not be wanted, that I cannot, that I must not – But see here. Here is a rouble for you. Oh, good Lord!"

By this time even louder and more angry exclamations had begun to ascend from Gubin. Yet the only sound to reach my ears was the woman's muttered whispering, and as I glanced into her face I perceived that its hitherto high-coloured and rounded contours had fallen in, and turned grey, and that her flushed lips were trembling to such an extent as almost to prevent the articulation of her words. Lastly, her eyes were frozen into an expression of pitiful, doglike terror.

Suddenly she shrugged her shoulders, straightened her form, put away from her the expression of terror, and said quietly, but incisively:

"You will not need to say anything about this. Allow me."

And with a swaying step she departed – a step so short as almost to convey the impression that her legs were bound together. Yet while the gait was the gait of a person full of suppressed fury, it was also the gait of a person who can scarcely see an inch in advance.

"Haul away, you!" shouted Gubin.

I hauled him up in a state of cold and wet; whereafter he fell to stamping around the coping of the well, cursing, and waving his arms.

"What have you been thinking of all this time?" he vociferated. "Why, for ever so long I shouted and shouted to you!"

"I have been telling Nadezhda that last night you saw her walking in the garden."

He sprang towards me with a vicious scowl.

"Who gave you leave to do so?" he exclaimed.

"Wait a moment. I said that it was only in a dream, that you saw her crossing the garden to the washhouse."

"Indeed? And why did you do that?"

Somehow, as, barelegged and dripping with mud, he stood blinking his eyes at me with a most disagreeable expression, he looked extremely comical.

"See here," I remarked, "you have only to go and tell her husband about her for me to go and tell him the same story about your having seen the whole thing in a dream."

"Why?" cried Gubin, now almost beside himself. Presently, however, he recovered sufficient self-possession to grin and ask in an undertone:

"HOW MUCH DID SHE GIVE YOU?"

I explained to him that my sole reason for what I had done had been that I pitied the woman, and feared lest the brothers Birkin should do an injury to one who at least ought not to be betrayed. Gubin began by declining to believe me, but eventually, after the matter had been thought out, said:

"Acceptance of money for doing what is right is certainly irregular; but at least is it better than acceptance of money for conniving at sin. Well, you have spoiled my scheme, young fellow. Hired only to clean out the well, I would nevertheless have cleaned out the establishment as a whole, and taken pleasure in doing so."

Then once more he relapsed into fury, and muttered as he scurried round and round the well:

"How DARED you poke your nose into other people's affairs? Who are YOU in this establishment?"

The air was hot and arid, yet still the sky was as dull as though coated throughout with the dust of summer, and, as yet, one could gaze at the sun's purple, rayless orb without blinking, and as easily as one could have gazed at the glowing embers of a wood fire.

Seated on the fence, a number of rooks were directing intelligent black eyes upon the heaps of mud which lay around the coping of the well. And from time to time they fluttered their wings impatiently, and cawed.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.